

On Frost



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On Frost

The Best from *American Literature*

Edited by Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd

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Series Introduction

From Vol. 1, no. 1, in March 1929 to the latest issue, the front cover of *American Literature* has proclaimed that it is published "with the Cooperation of the American Literature Section [earlier Group] of the Modern Language Association." Though not easy to explain simply, the facts behind that statement have deeply influenced the conduct and contents of the journal for five decades and more. The journal has never been the "official" or "authorized" organ of any professional organization. Neither, however, has it been an independent expression of the tastes or ideas of Jay B. Hubbell, Clarence Gohdes, or Arlin Turner, for example. Historically, it was first in its field, designedly so. But its character has been unique, too.

Part of the tradition of the journal says that Hubbell in founding it intended a journal that should "hold the mirror up to the profession"—reflecting steadily its current interests and (ideally) at least sampling the best work being done by historians, critics, and bibliographers of American literature during any given year. Such remains the intent of the editors based at Duke University; such also through the decades has been the intent of the Board of Editors elected by the vote of members of the professional association—"Group" or "Section."

The operative point lies in the provisions of the constitutional "Agreements" between the now "Section" and the journal. One of these provides that the journal shall publish no article not approved by two readers from the elected Board. Another provides that the Chairman of the Board or, if one has been appointed and is acting in the editorial capacity at Duke, the Managing Editor need publish no article not judged worthy of the journal. Historically, again, the members of the successive Boards and the Duke editor have seen eye-to-eye. The Board has tended to approve fewer than one out of every ten submissions. The tradition of the journal dictates that it keep a slim back-log. With however much revision, therefore, the journal publishes practically everything the Board approves.

Founder Hubbell set an example from the start by achieving the

almost total participation of the profession in the first five numbers of *American Literature*. Cairns, Murdock, Pattee, and Rusk were involved in Vol. 1, no. 1, along with Boynton, Killis Campbell, Foerster, George Philip Krapp, Leisy, Mabbott, Parrington, Bliss Perry, Louise Pound, Quinn, Spiller, Frederick Jackson Turner, and Stanley Williams on the editorial side. Spiller, Tremaine McDowell, Gohdes, and George B. Stewart contributed essays. Canby, George McLean Harper, Gregory Paine, and Howard Mumford Jones appeared as reviewers. Harry Hayden Clark and Allan Gilbert entered in Vol. 1, no. 2. Frederic I. Carpenter, Napier Wilt, Merle Curti, and Grant C. Knight in Vol. 1, no. 3; Clarence Faust, Granville Hicks, and Robert Morss Lovett in Vol. 1, no. 4; Walter Fuller Taylor, Orians, and Paul Shorey in Vol. 2, no. 1.

Who, among the founders of the profession, was missing? On the other hand, if the reader belongs to the profession and does not know those present, she or he probably does not know enough. With very few notable exceptions, the movers and shakers of the profession have since the beginning joined in cooperating to create and sustain the journal.

The foregoing facts lend a special distinction to the best articles in *American Literature*. They represent the many, often tumultuous winds of doctrine which have blown from the beginnings through the years of the decade next to last in this century. Those articles often became the firm footings upon which present structures of understanding rest. Looking backward, one finds that the argonauts were doughty. Though we know a great deal more than they, they are a great deal of what we know. Typically, the old best authors wrote well—better than most of us. Conceptually, even ideologically, we still wrestle with ideas they created. And every now and again one finds of course that certain of the latest work has reinvented the wheel one time more. Every now and again one finds a sunburst idea which present scholarship has forgotten. Then it appears that we have receded into mist or darkness by comparison.

Historical change, not always for the better, also shows itself in methods (and their implied theories) of how to present evidence, structure an argument, craft a scholarly article. The old masters were far from agreed—much to the contrary—about these matters.

But they are worth knowing in their own variety as well as in their instructive differences from us.

On the other hand, the majority of *American Literature*'s authors of the best remain among us, working, teaching, writing. One testimony to the quality of their masterliness is the frequency with which the journal gets requests from the makers of textbooks or collections of commentary to reprint from its pages. Now the opportunity presents itself to select without concern for permissions fees what seems the best about a number of authors and topics from the whole sweep of *American Literature*.

The fundamental reason for this series, in other words, lies in the intrinsic, enduring value of articles that have appeared in *American Literature* since 1929. The compilers, with humility, have accepted the challenge of choosing the best from well over a thousand articles and notes. By "best" is meant original yet sound, interesting, and useful for the study and teaching of an author, intellectual movement, motif, or genre.

The articles chosen for each volume of this series are given simply in the order of their first publication, thus speaking for themselves and entirely making their own points rather than serving the compilers' view of literary or philosophical or historical patterns. Happily, a chronological order has the virtues of displaying both the development of insight into a particular author, text, or motif and the shifts of scholarly and critical emphasis since 1929. But comparisons or trend-watching or a genetic approach should not blur the individual excellence of the articles reprinted. Each has opened a fresh line of inquiry, established a major perspective on a familiar problem, or settled a question that had bedeviled the experts. The compilers aim neither to demonstrate nor undermine any orthodoxy, still less to justify a preference for research over explication, for instance. In the original and still current subtitle, *American Literature* honors literary history and criticism equally—along with bibliography. To the compilers this series does demonstrate that any worthwhile author or text or problem can generate a variety of challenging perspectives. Collectively, the articles in its volumes have helped to raise contemporary standards of scholarship and criticism.

This series is planned to serve as a live resource, not as a homage

to once vibrant but petrifying achievements in the past. For several sound reasons, its volumes prove to be weighted toward the more recent articles, but none of those reasons includes a presumed superiority of insight or of guiding doctrine among the most recent generations. Some of the older articles could benefit now from a minor revision, but the compilers have decided to reprint all of them exactly as they first appeared. In their time they met fully the standards of first-class research and judgment. Today's scholar and critic, their fortunate heir, should hope that rising generations will esteem his or her work so highly.

Many of the articles published in *American Literature* have actually come (and continue to come) from younger, even new members of the profession. Because many of those authors climb on to prominence in the field, the fact is worth emphasizing. Brief notes on the contributors in the volumes of their series may help readers to discover other biographical or cultural patterns.

Edwin H. Cady
Louis J. Budd

On Frost

Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense

Robert S. Newdick

WITH T. S. Eliot's recent absorption in the verse play, with Maxwell Anderson's success in that genre both on the boards and in the movies, and with Archibald MacLeish's experiments in *Panic* in the theater and *The Fall of the City* on the radio, the most striking phenomenon in the poetry of the day is unquestionably the general renascence of the poetic drama after its untroubled sleep of some thirty years. And except for the discussion of the place of propaganda in literature, the air of literary criticism these days is most challengingly filled with discussions of the knotty problems of accurately and effectively transcribing in verse the actual speech of the present. Perhaps, therefore, it may be in order to recall to a generation of intense but self-absorbed younger dramatic poets the wisdom of Robert Frost, and to do so by stating and tracing the development of the central point of his *ars poetica*, for Frost has addressed himself for forty-odd years primarily to the fundamental problems involved in capturing in poetry the full range of tones in the speech of living men and women.

Frost came to himself as a young man at the remarkably youthful age of fifteen; at seventeen he had realized his calling in life to be poetry; at twenty he had determined upon the particular road he was to follow; and he traveled it for nearly two decades before his achievement was acclaimed as it deserved to be. He came to himself when he began penetratingly to read for himself; and though he read both widely and intensively and found much to admire, he never came under the dominating influence of any poet English or American except Shakespeare. Shortly after beginning to read for himself he began to write verses; and by 1892, when he wrote "My Butterfly" and other pieces he still chooses to stand by, he knew that henceforth his first allegiance was to poetry.

As for the particular road he was to follow, there is more to be said. In a manner of speaking, it all grew out of William Hayes Ward's buying "My Butterfly" for his New York *Independent* in 1894. Ward accompanied his cheque for fifteen dollars with a

letter of commendation, and then and later counseled Frost to give his days and nights to the study of Sidney Lanier, whose verse he had often printed some twenty years earlier. What the youth of nineteen found in Lanier's poetry and literary criticism was not to his liking. He therefore refused to take that road, and Ward thereupon gave him up.

Meanwhile, however, Ward had written to a friend of his in Lawrence, the Rev. Mr. William A. Wolcott, suggesting that Wolcott look the young man up. Wolcott liked Frost despite his quiet stubbornness, won his confidence, and before long they were discussing his poems. One point that the clergyman made was that the tone of the verses was too much like that of talk.

That observation was to Frost like the drop of acid that magically brings down the precipitate from a chemical solution, for the tone of talk was precisely what he had been striving for without being quite conscious of it. Now he realized what he had taken particular delight in when he met it on the printed page, but what in the vast stretches of poetry he found more remarkable for its absence than for its presence: tones of voice. Now he realized, too, what he had found most offensive in Lanier: the underlying concept of the aptness of musical notation for verse, a concept resulting in poetry in which, as Frost phrased it later, "all the tones of the human voice in natural speech are entirely eliminated, leaving the sound of sense without root in experience." And now, finally, he realized what had drawn him summer after summer to work on farms in southern New Hampshire: the fascination of the sound of sense in language whose strong roots drove far down into the rich soil of really vital human experience.

So one of the unobtrusive but really revolutionary aspects of his first important book—its emphasis on living speech—is properly to be regarded only against a background of principle and practice to which the poet devoted himself for twenty years before winning the applause of fellow artists and of the poetry-reading public.

In speaking of this central principle Frost at different times has used different phrases, such as "sentence-sound," "sound-posture," "vocal-gesture," "the sound of sense," etc. Nevertheless, the principle itself has remained constant in his mind. But because the principle strikes more deeply and embraces much more than simply a conversational manner in verse, it may be well at this point to

extend merely vague and general apprehension of the principle to more nearly exact and thorough comprehension of it. And it will be well also to conduct as much as possible of the exposition in the words of the poet-critic himself, though it should be observed at the outset that, unlike a number of younger contemporary poets, Frost has not formally entered the lists of literary criticism by writing *in extenso* of his principles and practices, and that therefore an adequate statement of any one of those principles or practices must necessarily be a mosaic of phrases and sentences and points made by the poet in converse with groups or individuals and afterwards reported—often imperfectly—by listeners.

In the long interview Frost granted to W. S. Braithwaite in the spring of 1915, shortly after his return from three triumphant years in England, the poet spoke, something as follows, of what he means by “the sound of sense”:

Before I give you the details in proof of its importance, in fact of its essential place in the writing of the highest poetry, let me quote these lines from Emerson’s “Monadnock” where almost in a particular manner he sets forth unmistakably what I mean:

“Now in sordid weeds they sleep,
In dulness now their secret keep;
Yet, will you learn our ancient speech,
These the masters who can teach.

Fourscore or a hundred words
All their vocal muse affords;
But they turn them in a fashion
Past clerks’ or statesmen’s art or passion.
I can spare the college bell,
And the learned lecture, well;
Spare the clergy and the libraries,
Institutes and dictionaries,
For what hardy Saxon root
Thrives here, unvalued, underfoot.
Rude poets of the tavern hearth,
Squandering your unquoted mirth,
Which keeps the ground, and never soars,
While Dick retorts, and Reuben roars:
Scoff of yeomen strong and stark,
Goes like bullet to its mark;
While the solid curse and jeer
Never baulk the waiting year.”

Understand these lines perfectly and you will understand what I mean when I call this principle "sound-posturing," or, more literally, getting the sound of sense.

What we get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underlie the words. . . . [L]et us take the example of two people who are talking to each other on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. This is because every meaning has a particular sound-posture, or, to put it in another way, the sense of every meaning has a particular sound which each individual is instinctively familiar with. . . .¹

Then he illuminated the matter of the sound of sense by rapidly sketching its historical development in primitive and savage society, by suggesting the basic explanation of the inadequacy of all translations, by pointing out the essential nature of folk-speech, etc.:

If we go back far enough we will discover that the sound of sense existed before words, that something in the voice or vocal gesture made primitive man convey a meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language.

I have even read that our American Indians possessed besides a picture-language a means of communication, though it was not said how far it was developed, by the sound of sense. And what is this but calling up with the imagination, and recognizing, the images of sound.

To carry this idea a little further: It does not seem possible to me that a man can read on the printed page what he has never heard. Nobody today knows how to read Homer and Virgil perfectly, because the people who spoke Homer's Greek and Virgil's Latin are as dead as the sound of their language. On the other hand, to further emphasize the impossibility of words rather than sound conveying the sense of meaning, take the matter of translation. Really to understand and catch all that is embodied in a foreign masterpiece it must be read in the original because while the words may be brought over, the tone cannot be.

In the matter of poetry there is a subtle differentiation between sound and the sound of sense which ought to be perfectly understood. . . . [T]he beginning of literary form is in some turn given to the sentence in folk speech. Art is the amplification and sophistication of the proverbial turns of speech. All folk speech is musical. In primitive conditions man has not at his aid reactions by which he can quickly and easily

¹ "Robert Frost, New American Poet." *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 8, 1915, Part Three, pp. 4, 10.

convey his ideas and emotions. Consequently he has to think more deeply to call up the image for the communication of his meaning. It was the actuality he sought; and, thinking more deeply, not in the speculative sense of science or scholarship, he carried out Carlyle's assertion that if you "think deep enough you think musically."²

Doubtless close students of literary criticism and history will already have recalled, first, some "anticipation of Robert Frost's theory of speech tones as the basis of verse" on the part of James Whitcomb Riley,³ and, second, the nineteenth chapter of the heterogeneous *Biographia Literaria*, in which, after quoting Garve on the verses of the German poet Gellert ("in which everything was expressed just as one would wish to talk"), Coleridge calls attention to evidences of the same virtue among English poets from Chaucer to Waller. On reflection, however, it becomes apparent that these and similar considerations which might here be adumbrated are really beside the point, for into the manifold problems of the sound of sense Frost has obviously dug far deeper—in observation, in theory, and in practice—than the level of the merely conversational: What I am interested in emphasizing is the sentence of sound, because to me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words; it must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound.⁴

Concentrating on the sound of sense; that is, on all that enters into the tones and rhythms of actual speech, involves no disregard for the laws of metrics, because, says Frost,

this sound of which I speak has primarily to do with tone. It is what Mr. Bridges, the poet-laureate, characterized as speech-rhythm. Meter has to do with beat, and sound posture has a definite relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation but separate in analysis.⁵

Or, as Percy Boynton summed it up concisely after conversations with the poet:

Mr. Frost contends that there are two rival factors in every verse product: the absolute rhythm demanded by the adopted pattern, and the flexible rhythm demanded by the accents of the successive words and by the particular stresses needed among the words; neither should be

² *Ibid.*

³ Bliss Perry, *The American Spirit in Literature* (New Haven, 1920), p. 258

⁴ Quoted from Frost by Braithwaite, *loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

entirely subjected to the other. . . . He says to let the spoken word and the verse pattern fight out the issue; the best poetry results from the nicest compromise between them. So in the forms of all his poems there is a not too insistent design—either in rhyme or in rhythm.⁶

The “not too insistent design,” however, has repeatedly led hasty critics to speak of Frost as one who writes in free verse. Perhaps Ford Madox Ford (then Hueffer) was the first to speak so, in the London *Outlook* for June 27, 1914, when he commended the poet’s “vers libre, . . . an excellent instrument for rendering the actual rhythms of speech.”⁷ At all events much ink has been needlessly spilled in the matter, for Frost has said plainly enough:

I do not write free verse; I write blank verse. I must have the pulse beat of rhythm; I like to hear it beating under the things I write. That doesn’t mean I do not like to read a bit of free verse occasionally. I do. It sometimes succeeds in painting a picture that is very clear and startling. It’s good as something created momentarily for its sudden startling effect. It hasn’t the qualities, however, of something lastingly beautiful.⁸

That there is no element of novelty in the principle of the sound of sense as applied to poetry, Frost is himself the first to point out. “[D]o not . . . be deceived,” he warned one questioner, “that this is anything new.”⁹ Then he cited examples of it in some of the early work of Edwin Arlington Robinson and considered its place in the theory and practice of Wordsworth:

When Wordsworth said, “Write with your eye on the object” . . . he really meant something more. That something carries out what I mean by writing with your ear to the voice. That is what Wordsworth did himself in all his best poetry, proving that there can be no creative imagination unless there is a summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked. . . . As language only really exists in the mouths of men, here again Wordsworth was right in trying to reproduce in his poetry not only the words—and in their limited range, too, actually used in common speech—but their sound.¹⁰

⁶ “Robert Frost,” [No.] II of “American Authors of Today,” *English Journal*, XI, 455-462 (Oct., 1922). Reprinted in *Some Contemporary Americans: The Personal Equation in Literature* (Chicago, 1924), pp. 33-49. Cf. *Literature and American Life* (Boston, 1936), p. 811.

⁷ “Mr. Robert Frost and ‘North of Boston,’” [No.] XLII of “Literary Portraits,” *Outlook* [London], XXXIII, 879-880 (June 27, 1914).

⁸ Rose C. Feld, “Robert Frost Relieves His Mind,” *New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 21, 1923, pp. 2, 23.

⁹ Quoted from Frost by Braithwaite, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

And inevitably he finds it most of all in Shakespeare:

When I think of successful poetic drama I think of the speaking passages. They are the best of Shakespeare to me. Lean, sharp sentences, with the give and take, the thread of thought and action quick, not lost in a maze of metaphor or adjective.¹¹

But what the judicial critic will here claim for Frost is that alone in his generation of younger poets he consciously and deliberately clung critically to the psychological fundamentals involved in the principle, that therefore he led by at least two literary generations the present hue and cry for right metrical transcription of the actual speech of men, and that—though this remains to be discussed—his achievements in applying the principle to poetry have both present and permanent validity.

These achievements were less clearly to be observed in his first book, *A Boy's Will*, a sheaf of lyrics published in London in the spring of 1913, than in his second, *North of Boston*, for when that "book of people" was published in the following spring the English and Anglo-American reviewers almost to a man singled out for special attention his success in the reproduction of the actual speech of men and women, and this despite the differences that are popularly supposed to obtain between English and American speech-rhythms. First in the field was the anonymous reviewer for the London *Times* who noted the "natural speech running without effort into limpid verse."¹²

Then a veritable chorus of poet-critics took up the chant. Lascelles Abercrombie observed that Frost seemed to be "trying to capture and hold within metrical patterns the very tones of speech—the rise and fall, the stressed pauses and little hurries, of spoken language," and went on to point out the "novel inflections of metre . . . designed to reproduce in verse the actual shape of the sound of whole sentences."¹³ Wilfrid Wilson Gibson deemed the poet to have caught "not only the sense of the speakers, but the very tones of their voices," and to have turned "the living speech of men and women into poetry."¹⁴ Edward Thomas declared that "the

¹¹ M. P. Tilley, "Notes from Conversations with Robert Frost," *Inlander*, XX, 3-8 (Feb., 1918).

¹² *Times Literary Supplement*, May 28, 1914, p. 263.

¹³ "A New Voice," *Nation* [London], XV, 423-424 (June 13, 1914).

¹⁴ "Simplicity and Sophistication," *Bookman* [London], XLVI, 183 (July, 1914).

sentences, if spoken aloud, are most felicitously true in rhythm to the emotion,”¹⁵ and also that the artist’s vocabulary was more “colloquial and idiomatic than the ordinary man dares to use even in a letter.”¹⁶ Harold Munro likewise stressed the “subtle cadences of colloquial speech” in the book.¹⁷ And, finally, in Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* Ezra Pound re-emphasized his fellow American’s mastery of “natural spoken speech.”¹⁸ Indeed, the one negative note among reviews of the English edition of *North of Boston* came from Alice Corbin Henderson, who complained of her countryman’s “insistent monosyllabic monotony.”¹⁹

It is true that by 1914 these poet-reviewers were friends of Frost—witness Gibson’s “The Golden Room”²⁰—but it is far more reasonable to regard their cordial understanding of Frost’s purpose and technique as springing from sincere approval than to dismiss it as proceeding from fondness for the man. Further, since only one or two of their observations touch on the historical, psychological, or technical aspects of the sound of sense in poetry, it may be that Frost had not talked with them of his intense absorption in the problem. Yet the fact remains that when the volume was published in New York, there was less unanimity among the American reviewers than there had been among the English on the score of the balance struck between the rhythms of speech on the one hand and the minimum necessities of meter on the other.

“Now we can go home; the book has gone home,” Frost remarked to his wife, and the lionizing that he was subjected to on his return to America is now a matter of literary history. Especially pertinent for the present essay, however, is the fact that as soon as opportunities to do so presented themselves, Frost began to expound the gospel of the sound of sense in poetry. “We don’t get tones enough into our poetry,” he declared to Carl Wilmore at Franconia in 1916.

Take, for instance, the expression “oh.” Think of what “oh” is really

¹⁵ *English Review*, XVIII, 142-143 (Aug., 1914).

¹⁶ Quoted by Gorham B. Munson, *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense* (New York, 1927), pp. 121-123.

¹⁷ “New Books,” *Poetry and Drama*, II, 297 (Sept., 1914).

¹⁸ “Modern Georgics,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, V, 127-139 (Dec., 1914).

¹⁹ “Recent Poetry,” *Dial*, LVII, 254 (Oct., 1914).

²⁰ *Atlantic Monthly*, CXXXVII, 204-205 (Feb., 1926). Reprinted in *The Golden Room and Other Poems* (New York, 1928).

capable: the "oh" of scorn, the "oh" of amusement, the "oh" of surprise, the "oh" of doubt, and there are many more.²¹

That homely but effective illustration has served him repeatedly since. Commenting on contemporary poetry to an Amherst audience in 1935, he observed a deadness in the simple declarative in which most of it is written; then he went on to say that you might define what he meant by poetry by calling it all the different intonations of "oh" and the context written around them.²²

He has said, indeed, that "All poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech." At the same time, however, he said that "Imagery and after-imagery are about all there is to poetry." And surely it need scarcely be suggested that it would be quite to misunderstand Frost to take his emphasis on images to the ear as precluding an almost equal interest in images to the eye. Once a child, seeing a swallow in flight, remarked to him that it looked as if the bow had got away from the arrow; and in relating the experience Frost added, "Give me fifteen similes as good as that and I'll find a publisher."²³ Further, for her extraordinary visual imagery he had unstintingly praised Amy Lowell:

The water in our eyes from her poetry is not warm with any suspicion of tears; it is water flung cold, bright and many-colored from flowers gathered in her formal garden in the morning. Her Imagism lay chiefly in images to the eye. Her poetry was forever a clear resonant calling off of things seen.²⁴

Nevertheless it is true that he values ear-images over eye-images; and, however masterfully he evokes the latter in his poetry, he purposefully exalts the former. As he explained to Stirling Bowen:

I try to make each word serve two purposes; in addition to its own meaning it serves as a guide to the voice in reading preceding and succeeding words. If this is not always true of each word, it is true of each phrase or each line.

²¹ "Finds Famous American Poet in White Mountain Village," *Boston Post*, Feb. 14, 1916, p. 16.

²² L. D. Wickenden, "Frost's Second Talk Stresses Originality," *Amherst Student*, May 27, 1935, pp. 1-2.

²³ "A Robert Frost Talk," *Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 17, 1924, p. 6.

²⁴ "The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 1926, p. 8. Reprinted, with some alterations, in *Prose Preferences*, ed. Sidney Cox and Edmund Freeman (New York, 1926), pp. 269-270.

There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is the most important of all to reach the heart of the reader. And the surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown up by a poem are important, but it is more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice. By the arrangement and choice of words on the part of the poet, the effects of humor, pathos, hysteria, anger, and, in fact, all effects, can be indicated and obtained.²⁵

From that statement of purpose and technique it follows that, as John Holmes reported him in one of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard in 1936, Frost "wasn't very much pleased when some one told him, once after hearing him read his poems, that now they knew how to read them right, because they had heard his voice."²⁶

Yet even Carl Van Doren has confessed that when Frost once read a poem to him:

the sound of his voice for the first time explained his poetry to me. I had, somehow, read the words as universal English, like any other poem's. But now I found that they were Yankee words and without their true intonation had never said to me half they meant.²⁷

Lesser but equally honest readers point out specific lines and passages that they have read appreciatively but not quite correctly until after hearing Frost read them either in person or in the Columbia University or Erpi phonographic recordings of his readings.²⁸ Such, for instance, is the thirtieth line of the justly famous "Birches"—the third in the sentence that follows:

One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer.

²⁵ "A Poet on the Campus of the University of Michigan," *Detroit News*, Nov. 27, 1921, Part Seven, p. 1.

²⁶ "Robert Frost as He Talks to Multitudes," *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 21, 1936, Book Section, p. 1.

²⁷ In "Post-War: The Literary Twenties," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, CLXXIII, 155 (July, 1936).

²⁸ Cf. "Phonograph Records of Robert Frost," *English Journal*, XXV, 417 (May, 1936).

Which word in that line is properly to be stressed the more in reading it, "stiffness" or "out?" The correct response is "out." Again, consider the third stanza of the unutterably lovely "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

Hearing Frost read them, one instantly recognizes the rightness of his speeding the tempo in the first two lines and retarding it in the last two. But even Louis Untermeyer, who regularly dwells on the poem in one of his most popular lectures, reads the lines without making clear the wholly admirable differences in tempo that Frost wrote into them.

Frost went on, in the same Norton lecture, to express his conviction that the great art is to make the poem so that it cannot possibly be misread; and his thoroughgoing admirers insist that precisely this height of art is his. Typical among these enthusiasts is Sidney Cox, who maintains that

The tones cling to idioms and groups of common words when spoken at a certain speed and with certain runs and pauses. And Mr. Frost succeeds in indicating, by the way he places them and by hints that go before, where the pauses come, where there is a slowing up and where a burst, where a guttural murmur or a snort or whisper.²⁹

And further:

The very sound of his poems is *true*. In some the sound is not only as important as the meaning, but most of the meaning. "The Onset," for example, tells me that man need never be beaten, that hope is not inevitably delusive; but I cannot find the assurance anywhere except in the sound of the whole poem. It would not be so convincing if it were stated. It would be an opinion, then.³⁰

In Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's copy of his poems, opposite that pregnant line in "The Mountain"—

But all the fun's in how you say a thing—

²⁹ Robert Frost: *Original "Ordinary Man"* (New York, 1929), p. 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Frost wrote: "And the chance it gives you for tones of voice."³¹ And whether or not the poet has always been completely successful in writing his poems "so as virtually to control the intonations and pauses of the reader's voice,"³² he has caught indisputably—and, to borrow Padraic Colum's adverb, "startlingly"³³—the vibration of the voice in his poetry.

³¹ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "Robert Frost: A Good Greek Out of New England," *New Republic*, XLIV, 144-148 (Sept. 30, 1925). Reprinted in *Fire Under the Andes* (New York, 1927), pp. 285-303.

³² Quoted from Frost by Stirling Bowen, *loc. cit.*

³³ "Robert Frost," *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, May, 1936, p. [5].

The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost

Hyatt Howe Waggoner

ALTHOUGH Robert Frost's poetic position seems as secure as that of any contemporary poet, the philosophical point of view consistently expressed in all of his poetry has never been adequately set against the thought currents of the past and of our day. Critics of the poet tend admiringly to see him as the voice of New England,¹ the plain man speaking simply of homely things,² or the voice of common sense;³ or, disapprovingly, they charge that he is not really contemporary, since he does not deal with science and machine civilization, or with the problems arising out of these two determining factors of our age, but with country folk, birds, flowers, and snowstorms.⁴ Others, the Neo-Humanists, come closer to understanding his thought when they praise him for having the perspicuity to see the rightness of their position and the virtue to associate himself with it.⁵ But Mr. Frost says that he is not a Neo-

¹ See, for example, Amy Lowell, in *Recognition of Robert Frost*, ed. Richard Thornton (New York, 1937), pp. 47, 48; Carl Van Doren, "Quintessence and Sub-soil," *Century Magazine*, CV, 629-630 (Feb., 1923); Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York, 1919), pp. 161-162; T. K. Whipple, *Spokesmen: Modern Writers and American Life* (New York and London, 1928), pp. 94-116; Percy H. Boynton, *Literature and American Life* (Boston, 1936), p. 808.

² Sidney Cox in *Robert Frost: Original "Ordinary Man"* (New York, 1929), *passim*, and William Rose Benét, in "Wise Old Woodchuck," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XIV, 6 (May 30, 1936); see also the following writers in *Recognition of Robert Frost*: Sidney Cox, pp. 155-161; Lascelles Abercrombie, pp. 24, 28; Cornelius Weygandt, p. 72; W. H. Auden, pp. 294-295; Russell Blankenship, pp. 223-226.

³ Gorham B. Munson has been the chief exponent of this view in his *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense* (New York, 1927), *passim*. See also James Southall Wilson, "Robert Frost: American Poet," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, VII, 318 (April, 1931).

⁴ See Isidor Schneider in a review of *Collected Poems*, *Nation*, CXXXII, 101-102 (Jan. 28, 1931); Albert Feuillerat in *Recognition of Robert Frost*, pp. 269-282; Russell Blankenship, *op. cit.*

⁵ The best discussion of Frost's relationship to humanism may be found in Gorham B. Munson's "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," *Bookman*, LXXII, 419-422 (July, 1930). See also Munson's *Robert Frost: A Study in Sensibility and Good Sense*.

In a recent (Aug. 19, 1940) talk with the writer, Mr. Frost told of a conversation with Professor Norman Foerster in which the latter maintained that the poet had given in his poetry sufficient evidence of being a Humanist. Mr. Frost, however, denied any connection with the group and asserted that any likeness between his thought and that of the Humanists is accidental.

Humanist. His protest against nearly all that science and the machine have done to our thinking and our lives has other intellectual roots; it springs, in fact, from a philosophical tradition so old and so respected in American intellectual history that it is somewhat surprising that no critic has ever adequately analyzed its background.⁶ An attempt to see the philosophy in Mr. Frost's poetry in relation to the tradition which he carries on and the current tendencies in thought which he opposes may help to clarify the issues.

I

When Robert Frost entered Harvard in 1897, he found there the same intellectual mood that had both disturbed and stimulated E. A. Robinson a few years before: *fin de siècle* disillusion and pessimism were in the air.⁷ During his two-year stay he was impressed most by two sets of ideas that seem to him now, in retrospect, to have dominated Harvard intellectual life in the late nineties: naturalistic disillusion about life, man, and (consequently) democracy; and

⁶ That there have been some few critics who have recognized the intellectual affinity between Frost and Emerson is true. No one of them, however, has ever given full consideration to the significance of this aspect of Frost's philosophical background. For example, T. K. Whipple in *Spokesmen* says, "Frost, in short, has not a little of the transcendentalist in his make-up" (p. 102), and Whipple sees this "transcendental streak which keeps him from a simple, naïve, unreflecting enjoyment of things, which suggests that a bird is not merely a song and a splash of color, but something mysteriously tinged with meaning, and which always sets up an inner experience to vie with, if not to outdo, the outer" (p. 108), as the root of Frost's symbolism in such poems as "Mending Wall," "Birches," "Wild Grapes," and "Two Look at Two." Bernard De Voto in "The Critics and Robert Frost," *Saturday Review of Literature*, XVII, 15 (Jan. 1, 1938), points out that the basic assertion in Frost's work of the essential dignity of man and human experience is "all but unique in this generation," the "only major affirmation that modern American literature has made," and that in this affirmation, Frost shows an intellectual kinship with Thoreau and is but carrying on the literary tradition of Thoreau's generation of New Englanders. Louis Untermeyer in "One Singing Faith," *Saturday Review of Literature*, VII, 530 (Jan. 17, 1931), calls Emerson Frost's "true kinsman" and finds them alike in their feeling about the ordinary man—in "the recognition of man's infinite possibilities"—and in their "lifelong curiosity 'about man's place among the infinites.'" James Southall Wilson in "Robert Frost: American Poet," *op. cit.*, p. 318, makes the statement that "in the combination of the philosopher and the practical man of wisdom, Robert Frost is like Emerson of whom he reminds one in some ways only because they are so different." G. B. Munson in "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," *op. cit.*, p. 421, says when analyzing Frost's so-called unconscious affinity with the humanistic position, ". . . he has deeply read his Virgil and his Emerson." Alfred Kreymborg in *Our Singing Strength* (New York, 1934), p. 318, declares that Frost has looked to the tradition of Emerson, Bryant, and Whittier. Cornelius Weygandt, *op. cit.*, p. 65, finds in Frost the "higher provincialism" he found in Emerson and Thoreau.

⁷ See Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1938), and H. H. Waggoner, "E. A. Robinson and the Cosmic Chill," *New England Quarterly*, XIII, 65-84 (March, 1940).

scientism, the attitude of those so excited by the triumphs of the scientists that they proclaimed that everything—poetry, philosophy, and even common sense—must give way to science.⁸

From the beginning Frost was hostile to both these complex points of view. While he shared Professor Santayana's distaste for the Bumstead variety of optimistic scientism, unlike the naturalistic philosopher he found nothing to emulate in the rather numerous Peter Aldens of the day. But the lack of intellectually congenial spirits among his teachers did not lead to bewilderment or uncertainty of direction. Beset by the same terrible problem that darkened Robinson's mind during these and later years, he found his solution more quickly, and with less groping uncertainty, than did the young poet from Gardiner. Unable to give credence either to scientific optimism or to scientific pessimism and equally unable to accept the philosophies of protest against scientific materialism developed by Royce and Babbitt, he turned to Emerson, whose poetry he had long been acquainted with, and to William James for an antidote for the poison of scientism and disillusion.⁹ Not by accident but guided by ideas and dispositions already taking mature shape within him, reading in the way that Emerson had urged American scholars to read, he had come upon what is perhaps the central tradition in American thought.

Mr. Frost has never grown away from that tradition. When asked today what philosophers most influenced his thinking during his formative years, he replies with the names of Emerson and James; when asked to give his reaction to thinkers with whom he came into contact, either personally or through books, during his

⁸ On August 19, 1940, and again on several occasions in July, 1941, at the poet's farm in Ripton, Vermont, Mr. Frost discussed with the author his philosophy and, in particular, his reactions to science. Some of the statements made by Mr. Frost during the course of these several visits are quoted or paraphrased in this paper as valuable corroborations of an independent analysis of his poetry. All such quotations and restatements are identified in the text or in a footnote; for the analysis and interpretation not so identified the author is responsible.

⁹ Emerson's poetry he discovered and learned to love, Mr. Frost says, very early in life. (He adds, characteristically, that one who knows the poetry hardly needs to read the prose.) That he has not forgotten Emerson is evidenced not only by his statements to that effect but by the fact that in one talk lasting some two hours he quoted Emerson twice and referred to him again when the subject being discussed was not philosophers but relativity. William James he also discovered outside of class: acquainted with James's books and reputation, he was unable to take a class with him during the first year because of university regulations and during the second year because (as Mr. Frost now recollects it) James was off duty that year. (Interview of August 19, 1940.)

Harvard years, having dismissed Adams, Santayana, and Royce, he says of James, "*There* was a man," and of Emerson, "A great spirit!"¹⁰ Frost's poetry, then, cannot be completely understood except against this background of the tradition of pragmatic idealism.

That Emerson did not develop a completely self-consistent system is too obvious to bear more than mention, but it is important for an understanding of what Frost has taken from Emerson. The poet found no necessity for adopting a "system" complete and ready-made or rejecting it entire; what he found in Emerson that appealed to him philosophically was attitudes and hints, passages and essays and poems which lighted the way along which he was groping. Emerson's emphasis upon the paramount importance of the individual and the necessity of self-reliance; his statement, perhaps the best that the past has yet produced, of the end for which democracy exists as the means;¹¹ his attitude toward experience and scholarship and the relation of the two; his insistence upon the reality of moral and spiritual values—all this and more Frost found in Emerson, and all this is expressed in Frost's life and poetry. The Emerson of the poems, of "Self-Reliance" and "The Poet" and "Fate," of the flashes of insight that are valid without reference to German romantic transcendentalism, remains Frost's master.

In James, whose connection with Emerson has been shown by Mr. F. I. Carpenter, Frost found the pragmatic tendency of Emerson's thought developed; and he found, too, what seemed to him convincing reasoning in opposition to the swelling current of naturalistic materialism. Though there is no evidence that he was impressed by "the will to believe," he had great sympathy for James's valiant defense of a humanistic interpretation of man and experience in the face of a science that denied that either was what it seemed.

So, after two years, having already found what he wanted and fearing, perhaps, that to stay longer would interfere with what had become his chief interest, the writing of poetry, he left Harvard. To have remained, he thought, would have necessitated meeting nat-

¹⁰ Interview, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Although Emerson tended to favor the Whig party over the Democratic, as Professor A. I. Ladu has shown in his recent "Emerson: Whig or Democrat," *New England Quarterly*, XIII, 419-441 (Sept. 1940), it has never, I believe, been disputed that his writings express the philosophy of a democracy whose aim should be the fullest possible development of each individual, in accordance with the peculiarities and necessities of his own nature, toward the good life.

uralistic disillusion and confident scientism on their own grounds and arguing against them at close quarters; because he had already found the solid New England rock on which to build his intuitive philosophy, Harvard had lost its attraction for him. Here was the forking of the road in Frost's life. Along one branch, well-traveled, went most of the intellectuals of the day—Mark Twain and Henry Adams, E. A. Robinson and William Vaughn Moody, William Graham Sumner and John Fiske, each in his own way combating or accepting the domination of the doctrines of science over all things intellectual, each, whatever his ultimate position, taking as his starting point the method, the conclusions, or the implications of science. That road was to lead eventually to "the modern temper" and equally to Dr. Link's *Return to Religion*; to philosophic behaviorism with its startling pronouncement that "we need nothing to explain behavior but the ordinary laws of physics and chemistry,"¹² and equally to the neo-humanistic manifestoes of a decade or so ago; to historians to whom moral considerations are irrelevant to an understanding of history, and equally to Neo-Thomism. For Robert Frost that was the road not taken. He took the other and returned to New Hampshire to write poetry of life as he knew it, to keep close to common human experience and see the symbol in the fact. While Robinson was composing the philosophic subtleties of *Captain Craig* to express the idealism which he opposed to scientific materialism, Frost was writing the poems which later appeared in *A Boy's Will*. If this was "retreat," "escapism," why, let it be. How could one escape from life? Were not those who thought they had disposed of a poet by labeling him "escapist" merely begging the question to be settled—namely, whether the thing the poet wanted to leave alone was good or bad? Robert Frost knew what he wanted, and it was not the waste land.

II

But when he left Harvard for Derry and Plymouth, England, and finally Vermont, he did not turn his back on what used to be called human frailty and sin, on evil and suffering, the shortness of life and the finality of death—the facts that make complete optimism seem a little ridiculous. He has been acquainted with the

¹² J. B. Watson in Watson and McDougall, *The Battle of Behaviorism* (London, 1928), p. 27.

dark. He has resolutely entered the darkest woods nature has to frighten man with, that he might determine his faith.¹³ Again and again in his poetry he has written of the impersonal quality of nature, of the element of fate in life; he has always known that the stars look down "with neither love nor hate."¹⁴ He has always known that nature, as William James said, is as wild as a hawk's wing. There is no tendency in Frost to romanticize. A great many of his poems, from the earliest to the latest, deal with storms that emphasize man's smallness and his need to be on guard, with gray and cheerless fall days, with old deserted houses and their reminders of death and fate. There are lines and suggestions in his poetry that, but for the differing styles, one could believe had been written by Housman. So much, in fact, is this true that a number of critics have remarked the "grayness" of his mood and have classified him as one of the poets deeply affected by the cosmic chill emanating from the doctrines of science.¹⁵ His leaving the traveled road that would have led to a Harvard degree for the Derry farm that his grandfather bought for him was not a retreat from "life" but the move of a self-reliant individualist who, following the advice of his beloved Emerson, made the choice that seemed best to him though it

¹³ See "Into My Own," *Collected Poems* (New York, 1930), p. 5; "I Will Sing You One—O," p. 265; "Acquainted With the Night," p. 324. See also pp. 12, 28, 38, 43, 131, 150, 309, 314. See also "In Time of Cloudburst," "Desert Places," and "Design," *A Further Range* (New York, 1936), pp. 30, 48, 58. Henceforth all titles of poems and all pages listed refer to *Collected Poems* unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁴ "Stars," p. 12; "Trial by Existence," p. 28; "Reluctance," p. 43; "The Road Not Taken," p. 131; "I Will Sing You One—O," p. 265; "Once by the Pacific," p. 314; also "Design," *A Further Range*, p. 58.

¹⁵ Amy Lowell, *op. cit.*, T. K. Whipple, *op. cit.*, Waldo Frank, *op. cit.*, and P. H. Boynton, *op. cit.*, see Frost's poetry as the epitome of dying Puritanism, reflecting all the somberness, desolation, and morbidity of a civilization that is slowly rotting.

James McBride Dabbs in "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," *Yale Review*, XXIII, 514-520 (March, 1934), and "Robert Frost, Poet of Action," *English Journal*, XXV, 443-451 (June, 1936), portrays Frost as a typical modern, probing the problem of man's position in nature, which, though omnipotent, destructive, and unyielding, the poet nevertheless feels to be man's source and environment. This fascination by nature and the unknown, this strong sense of its influence upon man, Dabbs finds symbolized by the recurring image in many of the poems of the dark woods which alternately lure and repel Frost, leaving him wavering between man and nature. He sees Frost, too, wrapped in the "modern twilight of doubt" with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the "final expression of this modern temper."

W. H. Auden, *op. cit.*, p. 296, comments on the "melancholy and stoical" tone of Frost's work.

Ludwig Lewisohn in *Expression in America* (New York, 1932) links Frost to the movement of naturalistic revolt (p. 493), and attributes Frost's acceptance of life as "tragic but not hopeless" to his adherence to naturalistic principles (p. 498).

meant flouting convention. He did not need the doctrines of post-Victorian science to keep him aware of the sadness of human life:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.¹⁶

Nor did deserting Cambridge for Derry mean that he could henceforth endeavor to remain ignorant of the thought-currents of his own time. He says now that he knows Freud only “out of the tail of my eye”;¹⁷ but though he is no avid reader of scientific books, he knows enough of the general trends of scientific thought to know where and why he differs with them. From the time of the publication of *New Hampshire* onward he has referred obliquely to science in many of his poems, and since about 1928, in keeping with the increasingly philosophic and didactic tone of his poetry, he has written several poems which explicitly state—as many of the earlier lyric poems suggest—his reactions to scientific thought. That there are not more such poems is not surprising to one who knows Frost’s poetic credo and understands the man. But there are enough to enable us to chart his beliefs about the authority and value of science and about man’s place in the universe.

If to doubt that scientists know all there is to know; if to doubt that their discoveries, though marvelously—and perhaps, too, fearfully—effective in changing man’s immediate environment and supplying him with information, have turned into unwisdom most of what was once called wisdom; if to doubt, even, that this practically useful information has revealed anything *really* new about the essential nature of man and the world, anything never before known or surmised by poet or philosopher—if to doubt this is to be “singularly out of touch”¹⁸ with one’s own time, then Robert Frost is out of touch with our time. But if by “out of touch” we mean “behind” the times, as, for example, we might say that Hamlin Garland in his last years was out of touch with contemporary problems, then it is significant that Frost’s ideas, where they run counter to what

¹⁶ “Desert Places,” *A Further Range*, p. 48. All quotations in this article from *Collected Poems* and *A Further Range* are by permission of Mr. Frost and Henry Holt and Company. All the poems referred to in this article are now available in the 1939 edition of *Collected Poems*.

¹⁷ Interview of August 19, 1940.

¹⁸ Isidor Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 101. For a somewhat comparable view, see F. I. Carpenter, review of *Collected Poems*, *New England Quarterly*, VI, 159-160 (Jan., 1932).

may perhaps be termed the "orthodox" scientific views, are strikingly similar to those of an extremely important and influential scientific and philosophic minority. And it seems to many competent observers that the scientists and philosophers who, like Frost, are highly critical of the naïve scientism and materialism exemplified by Haeckel and of the whole structure of Victorian and post-Victorian science are laying the foundations for a new "modern temper." If one thinks immediately of Alexis Carrel's *Man the Unknown*, one need not rest his case on that sensational book; the works of Whitehead, Eddington, Jeans, John Scott Haldane, C. E. M. Joad, Northrop, and Hook, to name no more, offer impressive support for the poet's intuitions.¹⁹ If Frost is out of touch with our time because of his attitude toward science, then a strong case could be made out to prove that these scientists and philosophers must also, when they oppose current tendencies and interpretations, be out of touch with our time. And not scientists and philosophers only: all those literary critics, artists, and theologians who have castigated the age for the blindness of its science-worship must likewise be included in Frost's category. For the basis of the poet's philosophy is the basis of theirs also: the conviction that the increase of scientific knowledge has not rendered useless the truths known to poets and philosophers through the ages. Or, putting it in a way less displeasing to scientists, science (to paraphrase both Robert Frost and Bertrand Russell) is a power-knowledge; it is in itself neither understanding nor wisdom, and what it leaves out of account may be as important for philosophy as what it considers.

This conviction Frost expresses in many ways, sometimes seri-

¹⁹ See, for example, A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York, 1931), *passim*; Sir Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York and London, 1931), chaps. i, viii, and xv, and his *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (New York and London, 1939), *passim*; F. S. C. Northrop, *Science and First Principles* (New York, 1931), *passim*, esp. chaps. i, iv, v, and vi; Sir James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (New York and Cambridge, 1933), *passim*; A. H. Compton, *The Freedom of Man* (New Haven, 1935), *passim*, esp. chap. iv; C. E. M. Joad, *Philosophical Aspects of Modern Science* (New York, 1932), chaps. viii-xi; J. S. Haldane, *Mechanism, Life and Personality* (London, 1913), *passim*, and his *The Philosophical Basis of Biology* (London, 1931), *passim*; J. W. N. Sullivan, *The Limitations of Science* (New York, 1933), *passim*; Alexis Carrel, *Man the Unknown* (New York, 1935), *passim*. An especially succinct and valuable statement of the nature and significance of the newer interpretations of science is to be found in Sidney Hook's "Storm Signals in American Philosophy," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XIV, 29-43 (Winter, 1938). Professor Hook's discussion has especial relevance for students of the poetry of Robert Frost in its analysis of the various reactions to the nihilism of popular interpretations of science.

ously, sometimes humorously. "We've looked and looked," he writes in "The Star Splitter," after telling of Brad, who spent his nights looking through a telescope, "but after all where are we? / Do we know any better where we are . . .?"²⁰ Nor has psychology told us much about human nature that has not been known—much, that is, from the standpoint of the philosopher. To be sure, psychology is often effective power-knowledge; it aids manipulators in controlling people, for good or for bad.²¹ But after writing, in the poem "At Woodward's Gardens," of an experiment with monkeys, the poet concludes, "The already known had once more been confirmed / By psychological experiment. . . ."²² In "The White Tailed Hornet" he confutes those who intimate that he has no knowledge of science by dealing with perfect sureness of touch with a popular scientific theory of instinct; but he does more than show that he knows the theory: the suggestion in the subtitle—"or Revision of Theories"—is carried out in a criticism of the method of drawing sweeping philosophical conclusions from the data of science. What is pointed out is that followers of the "nothing but" philosophy commit what may be called the genetic or analytical fallacy:²³

Won't this whole instinct matter bear revision?
 Won't almost any theory bear revision?
 To err is human, not to, animal.
 Or so we pay the compliment to instinct,
 Only too liberal of our compliment
 That really takes away instead of gives.
 Our worship, humor, conscientiousness
 Went long since to the dogs under the table
 And served us right for having instituted
 Downward comparisons. As long on earth
 As our comparisons were stoutly upward
 With gods and angels, we were men at least,
 But little lower than the gods and angels.
 But once comparisons were yielded downward,
 Once we began to see our images
 Reflected in the mud and even dust,

²⁰ P. 221.

²¹ Cf. Bertrand Russell on science as "power knowledge" in *The Scientific Outlook* (New York, 1931), pp. 81-84.

²² *A Further Range*, p. 41.

²³ For a further discussion of this fallacy and its relation to literature and for references to discussion of it by philosophers, see H. H. Waggoner, "The Modern Temper," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXVII, 282-290 (July, 1938).

'Twas disillusion upon disillusion.
 We were lost piecemeal to the animals,
 Like people thrown out to delay the wolves.
 Nothing but fallibility was left us,
 And this day's work made even that seem doubtful.²⁴

Briefly, then, the poet is saying that the limitations of human knowledge—and of scientific knowledge in particular—are severe. With Robert Frost the day of Bacon's, Fiske's, Haeckel's unbounded confidence in science is past; he knows that no matter how they may strain to be impartial and objective, to eliminate the inconstant and the uncountable, to control their experiments, by the scientific method alone men can see neither "out far" nor "in deep."²⁵ The caged bear who sits and rocks back and forth between the philosophy of one Greek and that of another or nervously paces from one end of his cage to the other, from telescope to microscope, is a "baggy figure, equally pathetic / When sedentary and when peripatetic."²⁶

III

If he opposes nearly all those aspects of "the modern temper" which spring from modern scientific culture and which the Thomists and the Humanists likewise oppose, he, like the Thomists and the Humanists, has a positive outlook to offer in place of what he dislikes. But—and here is the difference between Robert Frost and the chief contemporary idealistic and humanistic groups—he finds support for his idealism neither in the scholastic theologians nor in the Greek classics but in Emerson and James and his own experience. Fundamental in his philosophy is his conception of man's nature. In a period obsessed with the notions that moral ideas are meaningless, reasoning is rationalizing, and all previously held concepts of man's nature have been, somehow, exploded in the laboratory,²⁷ Frost holds that ideals are real,²⁸ that ideas are power-

²⁴ *A Further Range*, pp. 20-21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

²⁶ In "The Bear," p. 348.

²⁷ See esp. Hook, "Storm Signals in American Philosophy," *op. cit.*; Mortimer J. Adler, "This Pre-War Generation," *Harper's*, MLXXXV, 524-534 (Oct. 1940); and Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper* (New York, 1929).

²⁸ See "Trial by Existence," p. 28, in which courage, fate, and freedom are dealt with, and a conclusion very like that of Emerson in "Fate" in *The Conduct of Life* is reached. See also "Reluctance," p. 43 (man does not accept fate passively); and "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," p. 296 (man has a goal, a purpose, which takes him around or over "obstacles").

ful instruments in man's march toward his dream,²⁹ that man is not merely a body but a spirit as well,³⁰ that, in other words, intelligence and volition give man a power which is different from the force of a chemical explosion and which no laboratory experiment can prove to be illusory or necessarily doomed to frustration.³¹ Man, bound by fate, yet has freedom;³² and that freedom increases as intelligence and courage increase.³³

The surest thing there is is we are riders,
And though none too successful at it, guiders,
Through everything presented, land and tide
And now the very air, of what we ride.

What is this talked-of mystery of birth
But being mounted bareback on the earth?
We can just see the infant up astride,
His small fist buried in the bushy hide.

There is our wildest mount—a headless horse.
But though it runs unbridled off its course,
And all our blandishments would seem defied,
We have ideas yet that we haven't tried.³⁴

Frost's position on the relation of man to nature is essentially that of Emerson in the essay "Fate." Though there is no suggestion in Frost that nature is wholly benevolent and purposeful, though man's struggle against blind power and fortuitous circumstance is never minimized, yet man's mind enables him partially to control and utilize nature. In one of his most characteristic metaphorical poems, "Sand Dunes," he puts the matter succinctly: the ocean eats away at the shore ceaselessly and fearfully through the eons of time, but, though she may change the position of sand dunes and even alter the shoreline completely,

²⁹ See "Riders," p. 345. Cf. Emerson in "Power" in *The Conduct of Life* and elsewhere in the essays. Cf. also James in "The Will to Believe" in the volume of that title (New York, 1897).

³⁰ See "A Soldier," p. 332. Specific reference to parallels in Emerson and James would here be superfluous.

³¹ See "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind," *A Further Range*, p. 38.

³² Cf. William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe*; and Emerson, "Fate" in *The Conduct of Life*.

³³ See "Trial by Existence" and "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road." Cf. Emerson: "So far as a man thinks, he is free. . . . The revelation of thought takes man out of servitude into freedom. . . . The one serious and formidable thing in nature is a will" ("Fate," in *The Conduct of Life*, *Works*, Centenary ed., VI, 23, 25, 30).

³⁴ "Riders," p. 345.

She may know cove and cape,
 But she does not know mankind
 If by any change of shape,
 She hopes to cut off mind.³⁵

Here is a conception of man that is old-fashioned by the standards of the economic determinists and the behaviorists, the mechanists, the Marxists, and the nihilists. It is humanism without the absolutism or the emphasis on gentility, decorum, and "standards" characteristic of the humanism of More and Babbitt. It is rationalism if viewed in contrast with the antirationalism that springs from behaviorism and psychoanalysis;³⁶ but it is very like the pragmatism of James when viewed in contrast with the rationalism of the Neo-Thomists. Here is a conception of man utterly at variance with philosophical behaviorism and with most interpretations of psychoanalysis, with Watson's denial of reality to both mind and consciousness³⁷ and Freud's belief that "Dark, unfeeling, and unloving powers determine human destiny. . . ."³⁸ Here is a view of man which, since it does not deny the possibility of value in experience, does not make the writing of poetry a futile exercise or a purely private amusement, as Archibald MacLeish says "the modern temper" tends to do.³⁹

Man is not deprived, in Frost's poems, of the essentially human characteristics, reason, faith, love, courage; neither is he portrayed as forlornly and precariously perched, a chemical accident, a cosmic joke, in an alien universe. "We will not be put off the final goal /

³⁵ P. 330. Cf. Emerson's position: "Let us not deny . . . ['the ferocity in the interiors of Nature']. Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity. . . . Nature is the tyrannous circumstance . . . necessitated activity . . . violent direction. . . . The element running through entire nature, which we popularly call Fate, is known to us as limitation . . . [But] though fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. . . . Just as much intellect as you add, so much organic power" ("Fate," *The Conduct of Life, Works*, VI, 8, 15, 20, 22, 27).

³⁶ See Hook, "Storm Signals in American Philosophy," *op. cit.*

³⁷ "In one sweeping assumption after another, the behaviorist threw out the concepts both of mind and of consciousness, calling them carry-overs from the church dogmas of the Middle Ages. . . . With the behavioristic point of view now becoming dominant, it is hard to find a place for what has been called philosophy. . . . The behaviorists now affirm that there is no faculty or process of memory. . . ." (J. B. Watson, *The Ways of Behaviorism*, New York, 1928, pp. 7, 14, 65).

³⁸ *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1933), p. 229.

³⁹ "An Anonymous Generation," *Saturday Review of Literature*, VI, 503-504 (Dec. 7, 1929).

We have it hidden in us to attain."⁴⁰ The universe is vast, impersonal, and sometimes terrifying, but the mind can grapple with it successfully, for we are a part of it.⁴¹ Not infrequently in Frost's poetry this sense of the unity of man and nature, while it never blurs the distinction between man and the lower forms of life and the inanimate, becomes a longing for an almost mythical identification with nature:

The great Overdog,
That heavenly beast
With a star in one eye,
Gives a leap in the east.

He dances upright
All the way to the west
And never once drops
On his forefeet to rest.

I'm a poor underdog,
But tonight I will bark
With the great Overdog
That romps through the dark.⁴²

The telescope and the spectroscope are extremely valuable instruments, but they extend, they do not invalidate, the observations of the naked eye. The concept of the vastness of space springing from modern astronomy is impressive: it is thought-provoking, it makes good material for poetry if it really becomes a part of the experience of the poet, and it substantiates what poet and philosopher have long known; but it does not change the nature of man or the nature of that portion of the universe which we directly experience. Why should one lose faith in life because the further stars are shading off toward red? "The world's size has no more to do with us / Than has the universe's. . . ."⁴³ Life is implicit in the universe.⁴⁴ Though the inanimate universe seems to be "running down," life, which

⁴⁰ "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," p. 296.

⁴¹ Cf. Emerson: "But every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us is convertible by intellect into wholesome force. Fate is unpenetrated causes. The water drowns ship and sailor, like a grain of dust. But learn to swim, trim your bark, and the wave which drowned you will be cloven by it, and carry it, like its own foam, a plume and a power. . . . For, if Fate is so prevailing, man also is part of it, and can confront fate with fate" ("Fate," *The Conduct of Life, Works*, VI, 31, 25).

⁴² "Canis Major," p. 331.

⁴³ "Build Soil," *A Further Range*, p. 92.

⁴⁴ "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight," p. 342.

pushes up the stream against the death-current, is a product of the very current against which it struggles. Life, breasting the current of entropy, can only be described as a part of the stream turning back on itself. "West Running Brook," in which this idea is developed, is one of the most important philosophical poems of our period. Most frequently, however, Frost dismisses the "alien universe" fallacy humorously, as not worthy of being seriously argued about:

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there.

God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh)
God found I wasn't there—
At least not over half.⁴⁵

But even while he asserts man's power, Frost is a realist. He is by no means satisfied with life. In "The Peaceful Shepherd" he writes:

If heaven were to do again,
And on the pasture bars,
I leaned to line the figures in
Between the dotted stars,

I should be tempted to forget,
I fear, the Crown of Rule,
The Scales of Trade, the Cross of Faith,
As hardly worth renewal.

For these have governed in our lives,
And see how men have warred.
The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
As well have been the Sword.⁴⁶

And this attitude is typical of his spirit. He loves experience; but he is not tempted by his love, as a romantic optimist might be, to conceal life's blemishes. "We love the things we love for what they are."⁴⁷ Nor, though he dismisses astronomical spaces as not particularly significant for the problem of the nature of man and of

⁴⁵ "Not All There," *A Further Range*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ "The Peaceful Shepherd," p. 319.

⁴⁷ "Hyla Brook," p. 149.

the good life, is he insensible of the blight which modernism casts over sensitive minds. The question is "what to make of a diminished thing."⁴⁸ He is able, like Emerson at his best, to accept the limitations of time, fate, death, and frail human nature without coming to hate life and "debunk" man. But unlike Emerson, he constantly expresses his awareness of these limitations in experience: "So dawn goes down to day / Nothing gold can stay."⁴⁹ So life runs into death; and after death?

There may be little or much beyond the grave
But the strong are saying nothing until they see. . . .

Now let the night be dark for all of me
Let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. . . .⁵⁰

An agnostic in respect to the orthodox Christian creeds and a realist the core of whose philosophy is revealed in the poem "Acceptance," he nevertheless knows that life could not have come out of the universe had the germ of life not been instinct in the universe itself. He neither nurses false hopes nor agonizes over false despairs.

Unlike Robinson Jeffers, whose faith in man and all that life holds for him was destroyed by the modern temper and whose mystical aspiration is insecurely based on the possibility (for most men, certainly, the improbability) of transcending the human, Frost has faith in neither the beauty of hawks nor the peace and silence of stones, but in the possibilities within experience. His realism rests on a foundation of faith in man and in life.

IV

That faith may, it seems to me, be best described by the words *democratic*, *humanistic*, and *mystical*. His faith is democratic in that it involves a belief in the transcendent worth of the individual human life; it is humanistic in that it does not confuse man with nature and in that it bases its faith in man and in life on man's essentially human attributes and opposes the tendency of naturalistic interpretations of science to "explain away" man's humanity; and it is mystical both in its emphasis on intuitive awareness as a source

⁴⁸ "The Oven Bird," p. 150.

⁴⁹ "Nothing Gold Can Stay," p. 272.

⁵⁰ "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," *A Further Range*, p. 53, and "Acceptance," *Collected Poems*, p. 313.

of real knowledge and in its attempt to break down the boundaries of the discrete personality in its search for a mystical unity with nature. That much of this is merely suggested, not completely stated, in the poems is true; that some thinkers will find contradictions and philosophical inconsistencies latent in this outlook is also, no doubt, true. But a careful reading of all the poems leaves little question as to the general outlines of his thought: equally hostile to the genteel tradition and to the militant scientific empiricists, equally unsympathetic toward such "solutions" of the younger intellectuals as Marxism and Catholicism, in both of which he sees totalitarian tendencies, unlearned in the subtle philosophy of such critics of bourgeois scientific culture as M. Maritain and M. Gilson, he has neither "retired to the invincible heights of values, norms, and standards,"⁵¹ nor escaped the dilemma of the modern temper⁵² by joining with those who "adjust" man to a hostile universe by denying reality to all those aspects of man that distinguish him from rats and rocks. Standing off and viewing our "scientific" culture in the perspective of the ages, he has expressed in the whole body of his poetic work, from the earliest poem to the latest, both an attack and an affirmation:

As though a man who likes to live in the country is disqualified: As though a person had to live in New York to be a poet! Religion, escape! These themes of mine, escape!

No. My life has been the pursuit of a pursuit. Not a retreat. Near the beginning of Bunyan's book Pilgrim says, "I think I see it," and the rest of the book is the search. Escape may be the opposite: attack. Every man's life is a *wreaking* of himself upon something or someone. His base of operations is a personal matter. The only thing, the big thing, for us all is attack, finding something we have to take by the throat.

If you draw back far enough to strike a blow they say "escape." (A poem must have a point like a joke, point and thrust.) If you draw off it's because you have a longer spear, perhaps. (It's like a boy and the running broad jump.) My weapon's a lance and I have to back up to use it right. The dirk is a city weapon. . . .⁵³

⁵¹ Hook, *op. cit.*

⁵² The two horns of the dilemma are the concepts of the alien universe and of man as the extreme behaviorists conceive him. See H. H. Waggoner, "The Modern Temper," *loc. cit.*

⁵³ Quoted in Amos Wilder, *The Spiritual Aspects of the New Poetry* (New York and London, 1940), pp. 33-34.

From his chosen vantage point, close to the earth and to men too, relying, like Emerson's scholar, on experience and insight rather than on books, though taking from books what it has suited him to take, Robert Frost enunciates principles which science is supposed by many to have invalidated. He holds that man is man, not a reaction machine,⁵⁴ and that value judgments in ethics, esthetics, and social philosophy are not nonsense syllables, personal explosions, or unmeditated biological impulses.⁵⁵ If we are controlled, we also control. If the stars look down with neither love nor hate for you and me, we need not conclude that we are in an alien universe. If knowing what to make of a diminished thing is a part of our problem today, it is only a part. The rest is keeping our faith and our common sense in the midst of the world's despair.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of the widespread tendency in modern poetry toward disillusion with man and admiration for and glorification of animals, see Elizabeth Atkins, "Men and Animals in Recent Poetry," *PMLA*, LI, 263-283 (March, 1936).

⁵⁵ See Hook, *op. cit.*

Robert Frost's Asides on His Poetry

Reginald L. Cook

WHETHER IN the long south living room at The Gully or in the red house by the highway in South Shaftsbury, Vermont, or in the cabin at the Homer Noble place in Ripton, Vermont, or anywhere else for that matter where you might reasonably expect to find him, Robert Frost will sit long and talk expansively, touching arcs on expanding spirals of thought. Although he talks about simple things—a fresh flower found in an upper pasture, or the white-throated sparrows at the field's edge, or a cornered fox, there is a wide sweep to his conversational interests, which include internationalism (like Thoreau, he's a "home-cosmographer"), politics (he's an independent democrat), athletics (usually baseball), literature (chiefly poetry), America (notably Vermont), teaching (as "performance"), philosophy (out of the grass roots), and people (individuals, not types). He ranges the humanities, exploring rather than exploiting his reading, and using it like a man who has made it a part of himself. He is Bacon's ready man who, with a loaded mind, inexhaustibly quotes from the classics and his contemporaries. He talks readily at the surface, but he arrives there from a distance. He plays superbly while he talks, touching nimbly the keys of many moods and moving subtly from banter to seriousness.

He talks best in a small group, preferably man-to-man, and stretched out completely relaxed, his hair tousled, his tieless white shirt open at the collar, his trousers rumpled, his tennis shoes unlaced. On such occasions the visitor will likely hear an unforgettable monologue. After these visits the listener feels like Keats, who described to his brother George, then living in America, the wonderful talk he had once when he accompanied Coleridge at the latter's "alderman-after-dinner-pace" on a two-mile walk. They broached a thousand things, from nightingales to mermaids. It was a memorable walk, and Keats heard Coleridge's voice as he approached him. He heard it as he moved away. He heard it "all

the interval." Exactly how it sounded—its pitch and tone—whether it sounded like the droning of a bagpipe or like the piping of a bosun's whistle, we shall never know. Frost's voice is medium in pitch, rather low than high, but not guttural; and it registers sensitively shades of feeling—elation or scorn, exultance or sadness. It is the voice of a man whose ear is in key, reproducing at will Irish speech tones or nuances in colloquial idiom or the blank-verse paragraphs of Miltonic eloquence. It is a voice easy to listen to all day long, whether coming toward you, or heard as you move away, or "all the interval."

What is heard is the phonetics of thought—the way a thought sounds. Poet-like, his thoughts have the creative touch of personal language. The style is Robert Frost himself. Strongest and most exhilarating is the explorative thrust of the mind. He is always reacting, and always unpredictably. Anyone would have difficulty outguessing him. The natural variability of his weathered mind is its life. Quite unexpectedly there will be a run of speech that has the lilt of poetry in it. So I have heard it often as the poet's aroused sensibility lifted the listener on a sequence of metaphor on science and the atomic bomb, or released in him by flashes of phrase the rich joy of *The Odyssey* or Thoreau's *Walden*.

What Frost likes to talk most about is poetry, especially the composition of it. He is, he confesses, a "furtive worker,"¹ and while composing keeps the poem to himself. But he is not at all reticent about discussing poetic theory or technique. He has even wondered why people haven't questioned him more closely on a subject in which he might be expected to be informed.

He plays the art of poetry for "mortal stakes,"² for poetry is to him the play spirit on the level of the arts. The sports field or playing ground is the right analogue. "Art is a sportive thing. Anyone who plays a play or a game is that much nearer poetry."³ "Performance" and "prowess" are the objectives in the field of the arts, just as they count in the ring and pool or on the court, gridiron, rink, and diamond. The poet's play is as interesting in the art

¹ From talk with Frost at South Shaftsbury, Vt., June 2, 1933.

² Robert Frost, *Collected Poems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1939), p. 359.

³ Lecture at New School for Social Research, New York City, Oct. 17, 1935. See also Robert Frost's Preface to E. A. Robinson's *King Jasper* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. xv.

world as the athlete's form in the sports world. For example, consider the play of the poet with the poem. Frost warns: "If one starts to 'play' with the idea in verse it must be play all the way through."⁴ He distinguishes sharply between those who perform and those who make believe. "I like a person," he says, "who says all his life, 'Let's play something.' I dislike a person who says, 'Let's play we're something.' To have good art one must play with something, words in poetry, materials in art."⁵ He believes, too, that what is play for the poet must also be play for the reader. The enjoyment of the play spirit must extend in both directions.

Frost thinks there's no particular mystery about the start of a poem. "It begins in the feeling of having got hold of the idea of something," and, he continues, "you won't make the needed form right off." Recalling Benvenuto Cellini's pouring of the mold for his Perseus as an illustration, he says that the poet, like the great Florentine artist, in his eagerness to get the mold hot enough, "burns up the furniture and all."⁶ Everything must contribute to the creative passion. The effort in poetry implies consuming passion, and the discipline of form. "Everybody," Frost adds, "must have had a feeling of knowing before he knows, a feeling of a certain bigness of what it is all going to be about. You feel the form is nice—[you feel] it will come to you. Some [forms] are rigid, others less rigid. I could make a line of a sonnet like Shakespeare's; but then no one could tell whether I was going to write blank verse. The second line sets the form a little more."⁷

On another occasion he remarked: "There is but one place to begin a poem and that is when in the mood. It takes its origin inside a person and after a period of indefiniteness it casts about for something to take hold of."⁸ The idea is picked up when the mood is compelling. The form follows organically but sensitively. "Emotion comes in form; it shouldn't have to be squeezed into the form." He says, "You can feel a little system start to make, like crystals forming on water in the cold, and they set."⁹ Since "poetry is

⁴ Lecture at New School for Social Research, Oct. 17, 1935.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Talk at the Bread Loaf School of English, Bread Loaf, Vt., July 22, 1946. See also *Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini* (Everyman's Library; New York, 1915), pp. 405-411.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lecture at New School for Social Research, Oct. 17, 1935.

⁹ Talk at Bread Loaf, July 22, 1946.

ultimately some sort of tune,"¹⁰ he starts by hearing "the tone of someone speaking and as the form of a simple meter."¹¹ He writes many poems in the same meter, and tries to make them "all sound different."¹² His meter is either loose or strict iambic, and his three chief tones are talking, as in "Mending Wall"; intoning, as in "The Oven-bird" or "Desert Places" or "Acquainted with the Night"; and a combination of talking and intoning, as in "The Mountain."

Frost's creative challenge consists in the encounter of the form with the spirit and the necessity of commitment. He cites Robert Herrick's "Daffodils" as an example of a poet fulfilling the obligation of his commitment as an artist. He says, "I always marveled how the second stanza is just as perfect as the first." It is otherwise with James Russell Lowell, who was too clever and got out of his commitments too easily. The poet's commitment in the spirit and the form is a very important matter to him. "Sincerity is the relation of the intention to the form. The thing must be genuine, true, and you must have something to be true to."¹³ Nor is it otherwise in other literary forms. "In the short story I like to feel I can still hear the bell ringing from the first word when I finish the story."¹⁴

Art serves life by clarifying reality. Every form that fulfils its commitments is to the particular degree of its fulfilment an example of prowess in performance. And this prowess is what Frost has sought. The difference between purity and impurity in poetry would rest with him in whether the poet accepts the commitments and follows through. "Poetry is pure by the way in which it starts, that is, by where it takes its source." Impure poetry starts with the whole subject present; pure poetry doesn't begin with the idea or whole subject present. "A thing thought through before the writer sets pencil to paper is distasteful to me," he says.¹⁵ Poems written on given subjects or for assignment are impure poetry at its drossiest.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.* He also tells the story of a reporter who inquired: "Why do you write poems?" Frost replied: "To see if I can make them all sound different" (at the Writers' Conference, Bread Loaf, Aug. 18, 1945).

¹³ Talk at Bread Loaf, July 22, 1946. See also Preface to the Modern Library edition of his poems (1946).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Lecture and Reading, New School for Social Research, Oct. 17, 1935.

I suspect that next to listening to a poet's discussion of his method in writing poems the most interesting thing is what he has to say about his poems. Frost's readings are full of sly asides on life, acute commentaries on poetic art, and clarifying explanations of his poems' sources. To illustrate: his reaction against the contemporary tendency to close analysis of poems is very sharp, and he is no less pungent in his criticism of poets like T. S. Eliot, who, in *The Waste Land*, annotated his poems. When he reads "Departmental," which he once referred to as "my iridium poem; it's hard and useful,"¹⁶ he says, ironically, that he intends sometime to write thirty pages of notes for the scholiasts. He once remarked that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was the kind of poem he'd like to print on one page, to be followed with "forty pages of footnotes."

Frost's reactions include personal evaluations of the poems. He calls "The Masque of Reason" a "comedy," and points out that mercy is to the undeserving. Only justice is to the deserving. "All my poetry is a footnote to it"¹⁷ indicates his high regard of the poem. "This one has all my erudition in it,"¹⁸ he says of "Departmental." Of "The Gift Outright": "It's the whole story. It's all my politics,"¹⁹ or he refers to it as "my national history."²⁰ "Mending Wall" is about "boundaries." "Nationality," he exclaims, is something "I couldn't live without."²¹ "I played exactly fair in it. Twice I say 'Good fences' and twice 'Something there is—.' You can make it national or international."²² In Santa Fé during a reading, he called it "too New Englandish,"²³ and he explained that mending wall is an occupation he used to follow. The neighbor in the poem is not a Yankee as represented, but actually a French-Canadian (Canuck) who was very particular every spring about setting up the wall. Frost chuckles over the figure of the "old-stone savage." It shows, he says, that he is a "born archeologist." It is a "paleolithic" savage. Two things he is especially proud of

¹⁶ At Middlebury College, May 27, 1936.

¹⁷ Reading at Bread Loaf, Aug. 18, 1945.

¹⁸ Reading at Middlebury College, Sept. 17, 1943.

¹⁹ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 6, 1945.

²⁰ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 18, 1945.

²¹ Reading at Middlebury College, Sept. 17, 1943.

²² At Middlebury College, Nov. 9, 1945.

²³ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

in the poem are the "oh!" and the hyphen in "old-stone savage."²⁴ In reading it he stresses "I'd rather he said it for himself," just as in "Two Tramps in Mud-Time" he stresses "It's got to be for mortal stakes." When I once asked him if "The Egg and the Machine" implied the precedence of the organic over the mechanical in life, he replied that he was not "taking sides any more than in 'Mending Wall.'"²⁵ "Poems," he remarks, "can be pressed too hard for meaning."²⁶ He recalls how a friend misinterpreted "A Leaf Treader." It is about a year he kept getting sick. "That's all that means."²⁷

Frost makes much of tone; he depends upon the sound of the voice-tones to communicate the emphasis. Consequently, when he reads "A Drumlin Woodchuck" with a humorous twist, he inquires rhetorically, "The tone's everything in it, isn't it?"²⁸ The satirical tone is important in "The White-Tailed Hornet." The tone is important in other ways, as the following commentary on "The Runaway" shows. "Someone tells me once in a while about me, myself, just what my kind of poetry is like. They all seem to me to want to say that I am on one of the scales between two things and the two things are intoning and talking, and I am a little nearer the talking—but I vary. Of course the meter is there (in 'The Runaway'), but it does not intone as much as 'Desert Places.'²⁹ When he reads "The Witch of Coös," he makes clear that he doesn't "mutilate a sound. Doesn't know how." His sounds are not dialect, "just an accent."³⁰

Humor native to his grain is always important in his interpretive commentaries. With high humor he remarks of "The Cow in Apple Time" that it is "a very heroic poem." "I used to tell them I got that from the Prince Albert Memorial in London."³¹ He calls it a homesick poem because it was written in England sometime after he owned a heroic-sized cow. "Birches," a poem he quotes from memory very rapidly, is, he asserts, not an escape poem as one

²⁴ Charles Eliot Norton Lecture, Harvard University, March 25, 1936.

²⁵ Private talk with Robert Frost on June 17, 1945.

²⁶ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 6, 1945.

²⁷ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

²⁸ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 6, 1945.

²⁹ At Middlebury College, May 27, 1936.

³⁰ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

³¹ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 6, 1945.

critic claimed. "Anyone can see the difference between escape and retreat, and 'Birches' is a retreat poem."³² "The Drumlin Wood-chuck," "my most Vermontly poem," is about "a strategic retreat." He calls it "a smug poem; it's a love poem, too."³³ "To a Young Wretch" is a poem on "conflicting goods." His topic is never "good versus evil, but good versus good. It isn't a question of right and wrong, but one good opposed to another. Thus, the opposite of justice is not injustice, but mercy."³⁴ In commenting on "To a Thinker," he says: "You can see how far it is from these times [1936]. I was talking about science—from force to matter and back to force. . . . I have seen art make the change from form to content and back to form. We people who are given too much freedom sway between freedom and discipline. Where would one like to exist? I would like to exist, alive and in motion between those two things, swaying a little with my times."³⁵

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" contains "all I ever knew."³⁶ Of the swift spurt which delivered the poem, he says, "Easy does it." He indicates a similar reaction to "Dust of Snow." He first called it "The Favor" because it was one of those things that had come to him as a favor—a "nature-favor."³⁷ He recalled how once he had come upon some cliff brake at a cliff's edge, and how once, in a kitchen in his Franconia farm house, while he was looking westward into a sunset, the window was suddenly darkened by an owl that banked as it turned in its flight, and he felt as if he had been "spoken to—favored." These "nature favors" serve as inceptors of poems.

His reactions point out the relationship between the poem and his life. "A Peck of Gold" is about California, "where I was born,"³⁸ and "Neither Out Far nor In Deep" is about the Pacific, not the Atlantic, as some people might think.³⁹ "The Road Not Taken" is a poem about Edward Thomas, his English poet-friend, killed early in World War I at Vimy Ridge.⁴⁰ He comments fur-

³² Reading at New School for Social Research, Nov., 1937.

³³ At Middlebury College, Sept. 17, 1943.

³⁴ At New School for Social Research, Nov., 1937.

³⁵ At Middlebury College, May 27, 1936.

³⁶ At Middlebury College, May 17, 1943.

³⁸ At Middlebury College, Sept. 17, 1943.

³⁹ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

⁴⁰ At Middlebury College, Nov. 9, 1945.

³⁷ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

ther on the poem: "This has something to do with the same question of being understood and not being understood. It is one of the great ones in literary criticism. There is an old school of art that insists on the right to be entirely misunderstood by everybody. Some say that we must insist that we write for no audience at all. There must be an audience, an audience invisible, a blend of all the interesting people whom I have dealt with."⁴¹

"The Witch of Coös" is about "a veritable witch in a county in upper New Hampshire. There's a difference between a trance-medium and a witch. Saul's witch of Endor was a trance-medium, but this is a witch. Do not approach this witch with condescension."⁴² The name "Toffle" in the poem is to be found on a mail box up in Coos County. "The Thatch" reminds him of the black pre-World War I days in the black country near Malvern Hill where he lived "under thatch."⁴³ At night as he walked the floor in a dark room where the straw-thatched roof ledge grazed his elbows, he frightened the sheltering birds and scared them into the night. But flushing them settled his own melancholy. Something else had to face its kind of blackness while he faced his. "The Lone Striker" is, as he says, "about how I deserted industry without prejudice to industry."⁴⁴ Politics he learned at San Francisco as a boy; industry he learned at Lawrence, Massachusetts; and farming at Derry, New Hampshire. The poem recalled the time when he was a worker in the Arlington Mills at Lawrence.

As one proud of a high craft, he is also interested in form. Of "Choose Something Like a Star," he comments: "The separateness of parts is equally important as the connection of the parts. I wonder myself how they get together."⁴⁵ "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is, he says, "a series of almost reckless commitments. I feel good in having guarded it so. [It is] my heavy duty poem to be examined for the rime pairs."⁴⁶ He also says of "Departmental," "Don't be too interested in it, except for the rime pairs." He asks, "Did I do it [the riming] honestly?"⁴⁷ A

⁴¹ At Middlebury College, May 27, 1936.

⁴² At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

⁴³ At Bread Loaf, summer, 1928.

⁴⁴ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

⁴⁵ At Bread Loaf, Aug. 6, 1945.

⁴⁶ At Middlebury, Nov. 9, 1945.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

poem like "The Middleness of the Road" he likes to quote "just for the form of it."⁴⁸

When commenting on "The Death of the Hired Man," Frost reflects his anxiety at being misunderstood and misrepresented. "This is a short play, very short. One always has to guard against being misunderstood, not with you, but when I am in city places I always have to have a footnote about this. I always feel that they think these people are different from what they are, the two people in this play. Some people acted it in the city and I was invited a long way to see it. One was an old actor and the others nice people who ought to have known better than they showed, but they thought because they were acting country people in a play like this that they must bend their knees in a queer way when they walked around the stage. I told them after it those were not that kind of people. I do not know there are any of that kind of people. I don't know whether I told the truth or not, but in order to impress them I said both these people in that poem were graduates of a college. I wouldn't say a thing like that unless the provocation was great, but great was the provocation."⁴⁹

These commentaries are representative of the many asides Frost has made over the years. His method in the readings is invariably the same. The poem he quotes or reads stimulates brief, pungent reactions which show several tendencies. Either he identifies the poem with the experience in which it originates, or he indicates the way the poem impresses him in form or content. To the listener the asides have the quality of whimsical rumination, and for this reason they become of real interest. Certainly they have a further importance, for they not only whet the listener's interest in the poet, but also in the poem.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ At Santa Fé, Aug. 5, 1935.

Frost on Frost: The Making of Poems

Reginald L. Cook

I

ROBERT FROST is a gifted poet and not least among his gifts is the ability, in an Emersonian phrase, "to think on his legs." A ready, impromptu talker, he relaxes in the fields of conversation like an athlete on the playing-ground. What co-ordination, timing, and rhythm are to the athlete, gesture, allusion, anecdote, pause, and intonation are to Frost. Since he likes nothing better than to talk on the making of poetry, the following exposition attempts to draw together various comments of Frost while thinking on his legs.¹ Its focus is on the poet rather as maker (*poietes*) than as seer (*vates*).

First of all there is his play of mind in a quick, elastic, ever-ready mental resiliency. Addicted to stichomythia, or the art of the sharp verbal exchange, colloquially called "the come-back," he has the eloquence of rejoinder. "I like a quick answer," he says. "They're often in self-defense. We human beings are the only known things that have an answer" (Aug. 19, 1953). There is also his sensitive response to the impact of experience—more instinctive than planned. He appears, in consequence, to be rather a poet of unsystematized attitudes than one with a precisely ordered scheme. Acclimatized to meditation, he takes time to examine observations and events closely. When whirl is king, he applies the counter-friction of meditation. Touching his foot to the treadle, he slows things down to his own deliberate pace. "Let's go slow so I can see the flowers," he suggests when he starts out for a ride around the Vermont countryside (July 2, 1949). Experience is something that he meets deliberately.

The play of Frost's mind is a referential guide to his poetry. His comments on poetry are not to be considered as an evaluation of

¹ The statements by Robert Frost in the following pages are quoted either from private talks or from lectures given at the School of English and the Writers' Conference at Bread Loaf, Vermont, from 1946 to 1954. The dates of the statements are given in parentheses in the text.

that poetry, although most assuredly these comments help to illuminate how the poet works and what he is trying to do. Noticing and remarking, not praising, he thinks, are the important things (Aug. 4, 1948). Each of his poems has a life of its own, and together, these poems have not been written consciously as part of a special plan in the way that some novelists—Zola, for instance, in the Rougon-Macquart series—conceive of their work. The unity in *Complete Poems* is organic, not mechanical. It represents a drama of ideas, the many poetic acts in the play of a poet's lively mind. Frost's doctrine of play is at the core of his writing. In the preface to Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper*, Frost describes and applies his doctrine which is as rooted in him as the love of dramatic poetry with which it is affiliated.² But since the aim here is to supplement his published statements by reinforcing comments, let us consider how he now expands and applies this doctrine.

"Poetry," he asserts, "is a gaiety; it is for a holiday," and he formulates this in a thesis which should be nailed on the door of all the schoolrooms where literature is being taught (Aug. 1, 1951). Speaking for the poets, he says, "our object is to entertain you by making play with things we trust you already know." Making play with symbol and image, rhyme and phrasing is "the height of it—the apex" (July 5, 1954). Then he illustrates aptly by quoting snatches from Keats's "To Autumn," or Louis MacNeice's "Bagpipe Music," or Landor's "On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday," or John Philpot Curran's "Let Us Be Merry."

By emphasizing play it is apparent that he wants to be taken, not as bard or gleeman, but in the unsolemn role of poet as man. There is a shrewd understanding of both humanity and art in this stance. If the poet can once again write so wittily that what he writes sticks in the memory and runs in the head like anonymous tunes, he will liberate poetry from the cult of the esoteric, and once again make it part of the common heritage of man. Consequently, Frost aims not at the 5 per cent but at the 95 per cent (May 28, 1948).

Not everyone will know the difference between a said-in-jest poem and a serious one. Nor is it everyone who will see that what seems play at the surface is really play for "mortal stakes." In the poet's protocol with the world Frost *trusts* his reader to know either

² Robert Frost's Preface to E. A. Robinson's *King Jasper* (New York, 1935).

by experience or instinctively what he is about. One needs, for example, to be versed in country humor to get the play in "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury." Frost's play is belied by undemonstrativeness. It consists in the art of concealing the act of disclosure. The reader has to learn how to take hints. Some readers try too hard and misread the poem; and either through obtuseness or inexperience, some never catch the poet's play. "You have to know when someone is hinting," he says (Aug. 16, 1952). Poems like "Mending Wall," "Closed for Good," and "A Winter Eden" contain hints, but there is no hinting in "A Witch of Coös," "A Peck of Gold," or "Stopping by Woods." Of the latter he says: "That one I've been more bothered with than anybody has ever been with any poem in just the pressing it for more than it should be pressed for. It means enough without its being pressed." And, in a biting tone, he adds, "I don't say that somebody shouldn't press it, but I don't want to be there" (July 5, 1954). Often he has spoken out against the "pressers" and over-readers. "You don't want the muse outraged." And of "Stopping by Woods" he says that all it means is "it's all very nice but I must be getting along, getting home" (July 6, 1949). Yet no true reader leaves the discussion there. He knows as well as the poet does that what is important is how the poet played with "the constant symbol" implicit in the making of the poem.³ "Everything is hinting," Frost reminds us (Aug. 16, 1952).

In his doctrine of play poetry is variously defined. It is "the renewal of words" (Aug. 6, 1949); it is also "the triumph of association" (July 6, 1949) by which the poet makes "unexpected connections" (July 30, 1950) in metaphor. And a poem, which he calls "a thought-felt thing" (May 10, 1952),⁴ is something that "can't be retold except in its own words exactly" (June 29, 1950). The words he renews are the simple and common ones, freshly and exactly used in a readily identifiable idiom. As for the triumphs in association, they are apparent to the perceptive reader. In "Desert Places" the last stanza is an illustration of such a triumph. Not every poem a good poet writes measures up to this standard, but it is the abhorrence of a poet to see his poem translated by exegetes into "other

³ Introductory essay in *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), pp. xv-xxiv.

⁴ "The proportion (between thinking and feeling) is something," Frost said on the same occasion, "no one can help you about."

and worse English" (July 5, 1954). Amusement mingles with dread as he contemplates future scholars making critical explications with the ardent abandonment of the present generation hunting down or projecting imaginatively the relevancies and irrelevancies in Herman Melville's writings. Frost would doubtless agree with Gérard de Nerval that poems would lose something of their appeal if there were too much explication, if you could explain them. "Qu'ils perdraient de leur charme à être expliqués," said De Nerval of his sonnets, "si la chose était possible."

II

The sources of Frost's poetry are commonly the stuff of books, not *from* books, although it can be shown that for his subject matter he draws upon anecdotes or newspaper comments, observations of natural objects, a thing said or an act witnessed. That he happened to spend much of his life north of Boston does not restrict his rumination. "I come and go between the urban and the rustic," he remarks (June 9, 1949). He is as American as he is north of Boston; he writes from, not of. "The Road Not Taken" was started one stormy night in the winter of 1914 in England and two years later was finished in this country (Aug. 19, 1953).⁵ While he was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, he remembered the little pools to be found on the New England forest floors in springtime before the trees budded and wrote "Spring Pools" (Aug. 4, 1951). And "Once by the Pacific" started from a memory of Cliff House beach at San Francisco when it was a wild place (Aug. 4, 1951). Even when the poems start with an identifiable spot in space, the image communicated is unlocalized. The specific extends into the general, and the spatial into the timeless. For example, in "Closed for Good," the poet turns from *a* to *the* road; in "Mending Wall" from what belongs to each to wall-mending time. "Provide, Provide" has its source in a scrub-woman at one of the large Eastern universities (Aug. 19, 1953), but its significance is general.

The sources of the poems may be as varied as an Easter Island head in the portico of the British Museum ("The Bad Island") (Aug. 16, 1952); the sight from a train window in Arizona of a

⁵ "What I had in mind that night," Frost explains, "was not myself but a friend of mine (Edward Thomas) who had gone to war. No matter what road he took, he would always have missed not having taken the other. I was thinking of him."

small bridge washed out in a cloudburst and an auto near by which moved back a little each time a cake of earth crumbled off and washed away ("One Step Backward Taken") (Aug. 18, 1951); a memory of mud time on a back road in the mountains of New Hampshire ("Two Tramps in Mud Time") (May 10, 1950); the sight at Key West of an ant on a table that had come upon a moth which had blundered into an electric light ("Departmental") (Aug. 4, 1951); the look in the face of an old man with a fine head whom the poet had known—whose expression seemed to say, "Well, I'll wait and *see* what is to be *seen*." That kind of look" ("The Strong Are Saying Nothing") (Dec. 31, 1953). "Stopping by Woods" came to him after he had been working all night on his long poem entitled "New Hampshire." He went outside to look at the sun and it came to him. "I always thought," he explains, "it was the product of autointoxication coming from tiredness" (Aug. 18, 1951). And he thinks that "A Bearer of Evil Tidings" was probably influenced by Alma Tadema's picture of a messenger running up to a king, telling him all is lost. "And Sven Hedin and Marco Polo" (Aug. 20, 1949).

III

Frost talks freely about the composing mood, the poet's hypothetical audience, and the elements that make the form of the poem. He talks about the important things in his craft in a tone of relaxed purposiveness, a little as if he were bending over a bit the other way from the la-de-da critical pretentiousness which sometimes goes with literary discussion. "When I write," he states, "I must be free of all sense of rivalry and a part of the life of the spirit where it is non-competitive" (June 1, 1948). His poems are apparently created in a mood above rivalry and competition. "Poems are not remembered in tranquillity," he quips; "they are anticipated in tranquillity" (Aug. 18, 1951).

Such a tranquillity comes from feeling at the top of one's form just as in tennis when the player knows instinctively the exact distance to the back line, the top of the net, and the proper height to toss the ball for the service. "It's always a kind of miracle. You're in a performing condition, and then you play," remarks Frost (May 10, 1952). Nor are these times to be confused with moments of facility. They are, in his phrase, "moments of majestic instancy."

And once you've had this kind of moment "it spoils you for life. You keep waiting around for it to happen. They call it inspiration but I don't know what that means" (May 10, 1952). He adds: "You can write on assignment but I took the danger the other way." He awaits these moments aware of the danger implied in such a method. "I don't want to grant that spontaneity can be simulated. I've got to have a visitation, a moment. There's always a danger in waiting for the moment. Your pen dries up" (Aug. 19, 1953).

But given the mood, what motivates the poem—is it ideas? love of words? He thinks it is more than a germinative mind and a gift for verbal expression that "motors" the poet. It is nothing acquired but something the poet has as his birthright (July 1, 1949). He underscores the point that he does not start with ideas, he picks them up.⁶ He will quote a line from an unfinished poem—"Work that took me to the wood." Then he will explain how he had gone to a piece of wood to see where it had been cut over and because he was self-consciously looking for something as the choppers assuredly had not been, he discovered some whorled pogonias. The work took him into the wood, but it was the flowers that he noticed and he would probably not have seen them had he not been self-consciously engrossed in seeing something. Certainly the choppers had not noticed them (July 2, 1949). "I often start from some remembered spot," he explains (Aug. 29, 1949). Here is the mood, and the spot, and then the line that starts the poem. Now the poet is off like a hunter chasing a fox to its earth and anyone can see what pleasurable excitement there is in the poet's pursuit until, as Frost says, "the little destiny's fulfilled. That's all I hanker after" (July 2, 1949).

The poet brings to the poem "presence of mind," to be up to all the occasion demands of him in wit and phrasing. The idea is to "touch in and to strike out in form" (July 25, 1949). "Let chaos storm!/Let cloud shaped swarm!/I wait for form."⁷ This tightness of the poetic sentences, this sense of form, this wit and phrasing he finds in Christopher Smart's "A Song of David":

Strong is the lion—like a coal
His eyeball,—like a bastion's mole
His chest against the foes;

⁶ Robert Frost, *Complete Poems* (New York, 1949), p. vii.

⁷ *Complete Poems*, p. 407.

Strong the gier-eagle on his sail;
 Strong against tide the enormous whale
 Emerges as he goes.

Or in the early song “Hey Nonny No”:

Hey nonny no!
 Men are fools that wish to die!
 Is’t not fine to dance and sing
 When the bells of death do ring?
 Is’t not fine to swim in wine,
 And turn upon the toe,
 And sing hey nonny no!
 When the winds blow and the seas flow?
 Hey nonny no!

Or in Milton’s:

Fly, envious Time, till thou run out thy race:
 Call on the lazy, leaden-stepping hours,
 Whose speed is but the heavy plummet’s pace;

Or in the ballad of Sir Patrick Spens:

“I saw the new moon late yestere’en
 With the old moon in her arm;
 And if we go to sea, master,
 I fear we’ll come to harm.”

“I like form,” he will say (July 2, 1949), and in his own poetry “The Silken Tent” and “Why Wait for Science?” are examples of form that satisfies him. Of the former, he says, “It’s all one sentence that doesn’t break in the middle” (Aug. 16, 1952); of the latter, he thinks it is the most technically exact of his sonnets (Aug. 16, 1952).

Frost’s ideal in composition is a poem in which all the elements fuse; one, in his own words, where “the shape of the whole would be like the curve of one short lyric” (Aug. 19, 1953). And the poem stops (here Frost used his arm to indicate the inward movement and joining of two arcs) “when it closes itself like certain curves that close themselves” (May 10, 1952). The poet’s feeling for the rhythm is instinctive, like the swing of the batsman in baseball or the golfer on the links (July 2, 1949). The rhythm of sound is very personal to him. “I’m always bothered when there isn’t an ear in it—some relation between a rhythm and a meter” (May 10, 1952). The two

kinds of music he hears in poetry are a music as in Shakespeare's songs, and a music which doesn't lend itself to musical notation although it has measure or, as he says, "number running under it like a metronomic pattern"; hence the significance of "I lisped in numbers" (Oct. 4, 1952). His poetry dramatizes the literal by the voice, pitching the cadence of a colloquial idiom to rising and falling voice-tones, earmarked in emotional accents by moods of grief or anger, pity or pride, natural ebullience or spiritual ennui, dry wit or quizzical cogitation. In "Provide, Provide," for example, it depends upon how the words are inflected. Once, when reading "A Drumlin Woodchuck," he paused and said: "The tone's everything in it, isn't it?" (Aug. 6, 1945). The meaning's in the tone and the reader must learn how to take it—and Frost incidentally—at the *sound* of his word. "Everyone's got to have a metronome in his head" will be as applicable to the reader as to the poet (July 7, 1950). What Gerard Manley Hopkins says of his poetry is also true of Frost, provided the reader's metronome is ticking. "Take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to be read, and my verse becomes all right." So the way to take Frost is to get the tone of voice exactly right, whether ironic or impish, serious or sympathetic, tart or bantering.

One of the chief ways by which the cadence is sustained from line to line is rhyme. Frost stresses the poet's skill with rhymes. When he reads "Departmental," he introduces it as "a lesson in rhyme" (May 10, 1950). And he challenges: "Who's writing the poem, the rhyme or me? How much am I led on by the rhyme? Well, I won't tell you. It's a trade secret. It's for you to suspect" (May 10, 1950). Or, he will suggest: "You can watch the rhymes and see how valid they are—cloth, moth; size, surprise; such, touch" (Aug. 20, 1949). He thinks that back of the rhymes there must be "a strong intention dictating a poem" (July 28, 1950). Intention is the thing he stands on in poetry; the exact fulfilment of intention is art. Sometimes he knows the poet gets deflected from his intention. He will say, "I get beguiled. There's the guile in the thing" (May 9, 1952). He quotes with approbation Thomas Gray's "And be with caution bold." That is, in composing, the pleasure and excitement come from the chances the poet takes in fulfilling the intention. He has to learn to get on top of any impression and make it go deeper. But with caution. He must, for instance, control his rhymes.

Similarly, the words are to be precisely used; moreover, they must be the poet's own words. "I don't want any words that are not my speech words; I don't want mere dictionary words." He's "going to know a limited number of words and be alive to them all." Words like 'beautiful,' 'wonderful,' 'marvelous,' 'glamorous,' and 'lovely' are to be used sparingly. "Everytime you deny yourself one of these words you are strengthening your spirit for something better. Repression instead of expression—that's it" (July 28, 1952). "There's a kind of density in repression," he asserts (Oct. 4, 1952). What metaphors he uses must make connections between the parts of his knowledge. "When I ceased to make connections between the parts of my knowledge, then I would get scared" (July 28, 1952). He illustrates the "top places" in poetry where every word does something to the other words by quoting from the witches' speech in *Macbeth*, Act I, Sc. 3.

i. WITCH. A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap
And mounch'd and mounch'd and mounch'd.
'Give me,' quoth I.
'Arint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.

Or Keats:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn.

Or Coleridge's familiar

"A savage place; as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!"

Or Shakespeare's

Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:—
O no; it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Frost tells how he had written about ten poems in high school but there had been nothing of his own really in them. Not until he wrote "My Butterfly" was he aware of his idiom. Then he says he watched the other later poems to see when he was "in and out of it" (Sept. 29, 1951). He never writes practise pieces and if any poem that he has written sounds like a practise piece, he discards it (June 1, 1949). "I haven't written any exercises in my life," he will tell you. "I write the poems for keeps" (July 25, 1949). He thinks he has destroyed about as many poems as he has published. Sometimes he has turned to old, undiscarded ones and found part of a poem that pleased him and sometimes he has published an old one in a new collection (July 25, 1949). Sometimes too he uses what he calls "fragments of remembered failures" in the new poems he writes (May 10, 1952). And in the making of a poem he has never had a desk. "I never had a desk. I've never led a literary life" (May 10, 1952). He meditates as he works in the garden, or as he walks the city streets and, at home with a writing board on his lap, or over the arms of his Morris chair, he composes. No one ever sees him when he affects the poet; no one ever hears him when he isn't one. He has the realizing sensibility which it is possible to identify but not to itemize with impunity.

An interesting angle in Frost's attitude on the making of poems is his inclination toward narrative as well as drama. In the lyric there are the dramatic images of speech where voice-tones count importantly; in the longer dialogues the drama is in the give-and-take between people. But there are lyrics that incline to the narrative for, as Frost says: "I want to write stories. The great thing is the story" (Aug. 20, 1949). "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" seems obviously narrative. Some readers might include "The Witch of Coös" in this category but Frost refers to it as "a ten-minute dramatic one" (Aug. 20, 1949). Among the narratives, he includes "Love and a Question," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "The Gift Out-right," "Closed for Good," and "The Road Not Taken." "We forget," he says, "that these are all narratives" (Aug. 20, 1949). An excellent story-teller, he will often start a talk with a story—something from Herodotus or the Bible or an interesting story that he has heard. "Always desiring stories, I am," he explains (Aug. 20, 1949). Why the story? Because "the best kind of criticism is not in ab-

stractions but in narrative" (May 10, 1950). He thinks the writer does it better in the story than anywhere else. And what is the art in the story? It's in the objectivity. "I like people who can tell a story without seemingly being for or against somebody" (May 10, 1950). He tends to give his own poems, narrative or otherwise, the quality of teasing suggestibility. Take, for instance, "The Egg and the Machine"; toward which side does he lean—toward the organic or toward the mechanical? Noncommittally he says: "This is for you to choose" (Aug. 19, 1953). Obviously he thinks the reader ought to exercise his moral responsibility in choosing between opposites.

Like Chekhov, Frost apparently believes that a writer's obligation is formulating the problem, not simply offering ready answers. When people ask him: "What do you write poems for?" he has an effective answer. He says simply: "For the lark!" (Aug. 19, 1953). The pleasure he takes in making poems is partly from a surprise in where the idea takes him; partly also in projecting his unemphatic perceptions, sidelong thoughts, and fresh-sounding language and rhymes that communicate the wisdom of the unsaid. Because his poetry means what it says, there is no reason to assume that it says all it means. In making poetry Frost has pressed in to release the "dawn" in "moments." In publishing his poetry he shows by his art that he has tried to refine observation to a closer approximation to the truth. Humbly, but with self-awareness, he says, "For what I've missed I've felt regret; for what I've got I've felt a triumph" (May 10, 1950). Frost's poetry is pretty sound testimony of the cumulative force of his specific enthusiasm for an unabstact poetry and the compounding of his triumph in that direction.

The Unity of Frost's Masques

W. R. Irwin

ROBERT FROST'S TWO MASQUES—*A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947)—present a problem which is almost unique in his poetical work. Ordinarily his poems show a marked imaginative inception and are brought to a satisfying completion—not too neatly tied up, not dogmatic, but finished in form and content. This is no doubt what Frost meant in part when he traced the progress of a poem thus:

It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood.¹

A Masque of Reason leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling that the requirements of this description have not been fulfilled. Like the forty-third chapter of the Book of Job, it reopens the question which was awesomely, though not intelligibly, answered by the Voice from the Whirlwind. Frost's poem is not logically a sequel or a supplement; it is a review of the original issue, the unanswered "why" of Job's ordeal. With the passing of a thousand years Job's emotions have abated, and he can speak with a security and intellectual penetration which in his passion were beyond him. It is God who equivocates, apologizes, placates, and tries to explain. The reversal has offended some readers with delicate religious sensibilities. This is no great matter. *A Masque of Reason* is bold, but in no way blasphemous, and not essentially trivial. Far more threatening is the charge that the poem, for all its brilliance of exchange and exploration, ends in instability and unresolved paradox. It is signifi-

¹ "The Figure a Poem Makes," *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York, 1949), p. vi. All following page references to Frost's work cite this edition.

cant that Job's wife, as she lines up God, Job, and the evanescent Satan for a photograph, remarks:

Now if you three have settled anything
You'd as well smile as frown on the occasion. (p. 606)

These are the closing lines of the poem, and they seem to me Frost's advertisement that *A Masque of Reason* has come to a conclusion in which nothing is concluded.

From *A Masque of Mercy* this dissatisfaction is less acute. There is nothing shaky about the ending; indeed, the poem reaches a most gratifying intellectual and spiritual stability. Rather, there are hints of events and issues beyond the represented action. It is, of course, only part of an ordinary dramatic illusion that the beginning of action breaks into a continuum which had its origins earlier and that the bearing of this past on the unfolding present is clarified by "exposition." And this is true enough of *A Masque of Mercy*. But there is more. The flight, which becomes the quest, of Jonah (also called Jonas Dove) is that of the God-intoxicated but incompletely informed man. Indeed, Paul recognizes Jonah as such: "You are the universal fugitive,/Escapist as we say . . .," and this is what Jonah was in the Biblical narrative. The poem ends, as Frost said a poem should, in "wisdom," in a "clarification of life"—that salvation is by grace alone, a gift outright so consuming that the structures of self-reliant human thought disintegrate before it.

But where does the poem begin? Not, as is common in Frost's best speculative lyrics—"Design," "Acquainted with the Night," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "Desert Places," "Once by the Pacific," to name but a few—with a recorded phenomenon or an objectified problem. The beginning of *A Masque of Mercy* seems anterior to the poem itself, perhaps in the very paradox which emerges from *A Masque of Reason*.

The difficulties which I have been sketching disappear when it becomes evident that the two masques, for all that they are formally and intellectually self-contained enough for separate publication, are actually complementary pieces. The puzzles which Frost started in *A Masque of Reason* and developed to their fullest irresolution are further examined in *A Masque of Mercy* but taken out of a rationalistic context and brought to solution in an enlightened and unsenti-

mental faith which is basically Christian, though of no sect or special persuasion.. *A Masque of Reason* provides an analysis, which ends in the paradox that, though man's self-referential identity lies in seeking reason, the irrational remains supreme to mock his efforts. *A Masque of Mercy* moves to a synthesis, an orthodox synthesis in which peace and truth reside in a faith which is beyond the purview of reason.

Some insight into the reciprocal action of the two poems may be gained by examining their formal aspects. Though calling his poems masques, Frost clearly, and no doubt intentionally, departed from the requirements of the traditional genre, as it was brought to maturity in the seventeenth century. Frost's personae are, conventionally enough, embodied abstractions, but with marked idiosyncrasies. And Frost quite ignored song, dance, spectacle, and anti-masque, all prominent in the form as classically conceived. Moreover, conflict of any dynamic kind is absent—or at most official—in the masque. Virtue and opposing vices confront each other only in set speeches, and the triumph of virtue, a mandatory conclusion, is little more than a formalized assertion.

The traditional masque, then, is not well devised for exploring philosophical problems. Since speculation was precisely Frost's purpose, he was constrained to modify his basic form. He has not commented in print upon sources and influences. But we may properly see a resemblance between his writing and the vitalization of argument itself as found in the Platonic dialogues, though there is no Socrates-figure (Paul the exegete of *A Masque of Mercy* is his nearest approach), no genuine dialectic, and no Platonic myth. In *A Masque of Reason* particularly is some of the mocking tone of the dialogues of Lucian of Samosata, and in both a poetized colloquial quality like that which gives a peculiar energy and immediacy to some of Browning's dramatic monologues. Whatever influences impinged most upon Frost, the result, expressed in a highly individual idiom, is almost a form to itself—general enough, despite topical references, to be pertinent at all times and places, dramatic enough that no one can doubt the fatefulness and emotional impact upon the common reader of the issues with which he is concerned, hospitable enough to lyric expression that the problems themselves, even

when distressing, can be stated as if they possessed a concrete beauty of their own.

More insight can be gained by comparing briefly the setting of the two poems and the characteristic imagery which emerges. *A Masque of Reason* takes place in open sunlight—"A fair oasis in the purest desert." The first few lines stress that there is a "strange light on everything today," and God is first seen entangled in the branches of an illuminated Tree, tangled, that is, in the creations of human worship, which make a confusion of art and belief. But when God gets free, he is at once recognizable. The dealings between divine and human are as direct as they are commonly found to be in Greek mythology. There is nothing murky or concealed throughout, despite God's efforts to turn away the questions with which Job and his wife stubbornly ply him. Satan, though poorly characterized and without much to say, is undisguised; he is himself and no Archimago or "aged man in Rural weeds." Speech throughout the poem is colloquial and simple, as simple as the speech of the Book of Job itself is ornate. Everything seems to be suffused with the clear, revealing sunshine of the desert, the very light of the enlightenment. Yet what is clarified in all this light and friendly plain-dealing? Really nothing.

A Masque of Mercy has a markedly different setting and no sunbathed imagery. The action occurs late at night in a bookstore. Outside, whence enters the God-pursued fugitive Jonah, rages a storm, symptomatic of the peace-destroying world which is always too much with us. Jonas Dove, the fugitive, frustrated prophet has sought refuge in the bookstore, but he finds there no cozy warm bath of reassurance, finds not even escape back to the stormy world. He finds rather that he must surrender himself in utter abnegation. An easy heaven is not his destination. His way to light is through the darkness of the purgatorial pit, his way to glory through prostration, his way to life through death.

The imagery of *A Masque of Mercy* is murky, but not with the murkiness of hell. It is the murkiness of incapable human reason, which, finally surrendering, finds in the self-obliterating darkness that "there will be a light." Not the light of reason, which enlightens little, but of truth and mercy, not from man but from God.

It is, however, even more profitable to examine the thematic structure of the two poems, for both are clearly poems à *thèse*, and form, setting, and imagery are important chiefly as means of objectification.

A Masque of Reason might well have been entitled *A Masque of Justice* or even *A Masque of Justification*. The inquirer is Job himself, who, a thousand years later, now comfortable and still presumably possessed of all the material rewards which followed his ordeal, is yet not satisfied. In perfectly cool temper, yet persistently, he wishes to know why he was made to suffer so. He welcomes the unexpected apparition of God:

Here's where I lay aside
My varying opinion of myself
And come to rest in an official verdict. (p. 588)

Job's wife, Thyatira,² is also a questioner, but unsystematic and unprincipled. She is capable of protesting to God that it is not fair for female prophets to be burned as witches. But her disturbance is really no more than whimsical, and when discussions become difficult to follow she tends to go to sleep. Both "men" patronize her, find her charming, an embodiment of the comic cliché about feminine logic. God is the defendant, not at all sure of his case. He begins with a placating statement, intended to forestall the challenge which He knows will come:

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.

.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow

² Lawrence McMillin writes: "A connecting link between the first and second masques is the name Mr. Frost gives Job's wife. Thyatira is one of the seven churches in the Book of the Apocalypse. The church of Thyatira is reprimanded for tolerating a false prophetess named Jezebel who was (or will be) mixing prophecy with fornication. . . . In *A Masque of Mercy* the phrophetess Jezebel turns up as Jesse Bel, an archetype of the modern woman of the nineteen-twenties" ("A Modern Allegory," *Hudson Review*, I, 106, Spring, 1948).

You were afflicted with in those old days.
 But it was of the essence of the trial
 You shouldn't understand it at the time.
 It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.

.

My thanks are to you for releasing me
 From moral bondage to the human race.
 The only free will there at first was man's,
 Who could do good or evil as he chose.
 I had no choice but I must follow him
 With forfeits and rewards he understood—
 Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.
 I had to prosper good and punish evil.
 You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
 You are the Emancipator of your God,
 And as such I promote you to a saint. (pp. 589-590)

This is eloquent but unsatisfying. Job still presses his question. His insistence, however, is not merely from a desire for personal comfort. For better or worse, Job is a devotee of reason, which is, he notes, though always disparaged, man's principal concern. It is a part of his conception of divine majesty that there must have been plan and purpose behind his suffering:

You'd be the last to want me to believe
 All Your effects were merely lucky blunders.
 That would be unbelief and atheism.
 The artist in me cries out for design. (pp. 597-598)

It cries out indeed, but the only answer is meager. God acknowledges that Satan tempted Him with derision of His creatures' loyalty and that the whole ordeal was only a demonstration of power to shame the tempter's arrogance. No wonder that Job remarks:

I expected more
 Than I could understand and what I get
 Is almost less than I can understand. (p. 600)

From this point on Job's intellectual quest soon trails off into the concluding pleasantries of the poem. He has hoped for much and gotten less than, a thousand years before, he got from the Voice from

the Whirlwind, less even than he got from the angry fideism of young Elihu.

Perhaps this review suggests that it is possible to read *A Masque of Reason* as a highly impious poem, revealing a God created honest enough to delight Robert Ingersoll but impotent when called upon for justification. But this seems to me not a necessary, or even a defensible, understanding. Here the Frost-manipulated Job commits the same error as the Biblical Job, before he stood corrected. He believes that divine action cannot be just unless it comes within the purview of human reason and human standards of justice. Job is not at fault, nor God, nor the scarcely visible Satan. Rather it is the treachery inherent in the faculty of reason itself, always a lure to man, to an extent a help, but always beyond a scarcely perceptible limit a deceiver. This is what John Dryden had in mind in the opening lines of *Religio Laici*:

Dim, as the borrow'd beams of Moon and Stars
To lonely, weary, wandring Travellers,
Is Reason to the Soul: And as on high,
Those rowling Fires discover but the Sky
Not light us here; So Reason's glimmering Ray
Was lent, not to assure our doubtfull way,
But guide us upward to a better Day.³

Actually, Frost's position agrees with a major tradition in intellectual history. He accepts the distinction, familiar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, between "right reason," the faculty restricted and therefore efficacious, and "meddling reason," the faculty unrestricted and hence either futile or mad. For all that his curiosity is honest, Job relies for his answer on meddling reason, and his gain, though comically represented,⁴ is frustration.

In *A Masque of Mercy* the central figure is also a seeker, though he first appears as a fugitive—not a fugitive from justice but a fugitive distracted by what he believes to be the failure of divine justice. Up to a point he has acted upon a sequence of thinking which seems to him reasonable: that God will punish impenitent unrighteousness. He is aware that, contrary to the popular impression, a reli-

³ *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), I, 311.

⁴ For a discussion of the comic bearing of *A Masque of Reason*, see Reginald L. Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York, [1958]), pp. 148-155.

gious prophet has, not one task, but three: first, to denounce persistent evil-doing; second, to invite amendment; and *then*, to forecast the results of failure to repent and amend. But Jonah has lost his faith that God will support him:

I've lost my faith in God to carry out
 The threats He makes against the city evil.
 I can't trust God to be unmerciful. (p. 614)

Jonah is really complaining that God omits to follow the expectations of human logic, and this fact fills him with distress. Job in *A Masque of Reason* is intellectually and emotionally more poised, but essentially his quest is the same: to find, if possible, in God a conformity with human reason. As we have seen, Job fails, and the poem ends in a kind of amicable bafflement. Jonah is more fortunate. He finds in Paul an exegete, apostle, teacher, and therapist, who can direct the humility and goodness of the frightened prophet, despite the plausible false courses offered by two other characters, toward a receptivity to grace. Paul points to Jonah's error, the error of many who are obsessively committed to reason:

. . . you are not
 Running away from Him you think you are
 But from His mercy-justice contradiction.
 But here's where your evasion has an end.
 I have to tell you something that will spoil
 Indulgence in your form of melancholy
 Once and for all. I'm going to make you see
 How relatively little justice matters. (p. 615)

This is not easily done, for Jonah takes some professional delight in dreaming up disasters for the wicked, and he genuinely believes that, if God does not smite, His credit with His creatures will be impaired:

I don't see how it can be to His interest
 This modern tendency I find in Him
 To take the punishment out of all failure
 To be strong, careful, thrifty, diligent,
 Anything we once thought we had to be. (p. 624)

It is certainly interesting that the virtues which Jonah here names are not those associated with religious faith or godly living, except

in communities dominated by the "unco guid." Further, the implication, presumably not present in Jonah's mind, that God needs to punish for His own maintenance of power, rather than for the good of man, denies divine omnipotence. Jonah's devotion to his profession and to justice has carried him farther than he thought toward impiety as well as desperation.

Even so, Jonah is no zealot, and, though he argues, he yields to Paul's benign pressure. The teaching is simple: "Christ came to introduce a break with logic," whereby mercy, originating in love, overrides justice as a means of divine dealing. Paul's principal demonstration is from the Sermon on the Mount, which he asks all present to read again. No particular text is pointed to, but Paul puts the meaning clearly:

Yes, spoken so we can't live up to it
 Yet so we'll have to weep because we can't.
 Mercy is only to the undeserving.
 But such we all are made in the sight of God.

'Oh, what is a king here,
 And what is a boor?
 Here all starve together.
 All dwarfed and poor.'

Here we all fail together, dwarfed and poor.
 Failure is failure, but success is failure.
 There is no better way of having it.
 An end you can't by any means achieve
 And yet can't turn your back on or ignore,
 That is the mystery you must accept.
 Do you accept it, Master Jonas Dove? (p. 632)

He accepts it, but there is yet a surprise in store for him. He wishes to rush back into the world with his new-found clarification. This is not the way. His way is not through preaching and prophecying, but through purgatorial surrender, in the cellar, where the darkness will presently reveal a light and he must "contemplate Truth until it burns your eyes out." Accepting this necessity, the old Jonah dies. As William G. O'Donnell points out, this is "the death of the Old Covenant and the natural man. Jonah dies as St. Paul died on the road to Damascus."⁵ In turn, this death, a willing

⁵ "Parable in Poetry," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXV, 278 (Spring, 1949). Professor

sacrifice, has a conversionary effect upon another character, Keeper — erstwhile pagan, individualist, incipient Marxist, Unitarian, rationalist, what you will. He now acknowledges the fear of God, the wholesome fear that one's best sacrifice may not prove acceptable, and himself pronounces in the concluding speech both Jonah's valedictory and the theme of the poem:

My failure is no different from Jonah's.
 We have both lacked the courage in the heart
 To overcome the fear within the soul
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.
 Courage is what it takes and takes the more of
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal.
 And if I say we lift him from the floor
 And lay him where you ordered him to lie
 Before the cross, it is from fellow feeling,
 As if I asked for one more chance myself
 To learn to say (*He moves to Jonah's feet*)
 Nothing can make injustice just but mercy. (p. 642)

If *A Masque of Reason* raised suspicions that Frost is basically irreverent, fraudulent, or cynical,⁶ *A Masque of Mercy* might suggest that he has become a Thomist, pietist, or mystic. None of these inferences seems to me justified, especially if one regards the two poems as reciprocal. *A Masque of Reason* is a bold expression, though it lacks the spectacular qualities of Archibald MacLeish's *J. B.* *A Masque of Mercy* presents nothing beyond the comprehension and emotional reach of a thoughtful, practicing Christian, irrespective of his particular allegiance. The Deists have had their time in the history of religious thought, and no serious Christian can hold to reason as the sole and sufficient guide. The operation of divine mercy is, of course, always a mystery, but all have experienced it or know that it is their best hope, for ultimately they can rely on no other. The *Kyrie eleison*, which occurs at an early and dominant place in the Ordinary of the Mass, has some equivalent in every humanely formulated Christian observance.

O'Donnell's is the most perceptive article which I have read on *A Masque of Mercy*, and I am much indebted to it, even though I cannot agree with its central contention.

⁶ See Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," *Sewanee Review*, LVI, 564-596 (Oct.-Dec., 1948); Randall Jarrell, "The Other Robert Frost," *Nation*, CLXV, 591 (Nov. 29, 1947).

It may seem strange that, somewhat late in his career, Frost came to the "New England Biblical," in works which are long and diffuse for a poet who successfully labored to achieve an enriched economy of style. No doubt Frost's versions of the masque, though clearly related to his earlier monologue and dialogue pieces, were experiments in form. But the subjects—reason, justice, mercy—he has often before treated. I shall mention only a few of the most obvious instances. The widely-known "Death of the Hired Man" is a straightforward, though somewhat sentimental, representation of the special claim which the undeserving have upon mercy. The speaker in "Bereft" is frightened into an awareness that he has "no one left but God." "Desert Places" emphasizes man's inescapable fear of contemplating, unaided, his environment, and even more himself. In "Design" the intelligence seeking for rational benevolence in physical nature is brought up against a harsh refutation. Despite its final line, "The Lesson for Today" dwells on the insignificance of human reason and human nature and on the routine absence of justice:

The ground work of all faith is human woe.
It was well worth preliminary mention.
There's nothing but injustice to be had. . . . (p. 472)

In "The Fear of God" a more cheerful version of Frost's idea of mercy is set forth:

If you should rise from Nowhere up to Somewhere,
From being No one up to being Someone,
Be sure to keep repeating to yourself
You owe it to an arbitrary god
Whose mercy to you rather than to others
Won't bear too critical examination. (p. 538)

In the two masques, however, reason, justice, and mercy are much more fully and sustainedly explored than in Frost's earlier poetry. Particularly if one reads, as I believe is highly desirable, *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy* as complementary poems, the one an analysis and the other a synthesis, one will find a deeply meaningful treatment of problems which have plagued "man thinking" ever since he became capable of considering his own condition.

Religion in Robert Frost's Poetry: The Play for Self-Possession

Anna K. Juhnke

"RELIGIOUS" IS ONE OF THE LAST ADJECTIVES one would ordinarily use to describe Robert Frost's poetry. The individual self, which is its central reality, feels completely cut off from any "divine" reality beyond its own spiritual elements of love, courage, and creativity. Yet the speaker in the poetry keeps alive the possibility that something greater than man sustains order and purpose in the universe and may sometime break through man's isolation to reveal itself. It may even alleviate his inner uncertainty and fear about his final destiny. The terms in which the question is raised are strongly influenced by Judaeo-Christian assumptions.

Yet any self-transcending leap of faith toward such a possibility seems too great a risk when even to stand firm in self-possession requires heroic efforts against the onslaughts of time, nature, and the dehumanizing chaos of modern society. Easy religious assurances, like other palliatives for man's deepest fears and woes, are a dangerous temptation to "disarm" himself of his own resources of patience and courage. Frost's response to all threats to human identity is "Give us immedicable woes. . . . And then to play. The play's the thing. Play's the thing. All virtue in 'as if.'"¹

Frost's "play" with religious matters is a deliberate enactment of doubtful searching, hopes, and fears in poetic forms that control and distance them, often with humor. Mastery over this form is a kind of mastery over impulses either to reject religion absolutely or to commit oneself to it. Thus the poet can explore by manipulating an ambiguous theme, create forms for selfprotection and selfassertion, and finally make his own kind of salvation.

I

If there is any God or superhuman reality that man has not projected from himself, it is "like all who hide too well away"; they

¹ Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, *King Jasper* (New York, 1935), p. xv.

"must speak and tell us where they are" ("Revelation"). For one so grounded in material reality as Frost, such revelation is likely to be sought through nature. The stars, with their very different meanings for modern astronomers and for the old religious poets, provide a natural figure for the ambiguous play of both denying and affirming "heavenly" communication. "Choose Something Like a Star" and "One More Brevity" hint that the flaming mass of Sirius may or may not make moral demands, provide staying power, or incarnate itself into a dog to communicate "an intuition, a shot of a ray." A meteorite may provide a sign from heaven, as in "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Mailbox," or merely the hope, as in "A Star in a Stone-Boat," that, even if it is not a heavenly visitant, this bit of rock will be the one complete world the poet can possess.

The insistence on possession—of earth and selfhood—demands a pulling back from heavenly revelation, even the dazzling vision of "I Will Sing You One-O." Here the snowstorm outside the poet's defensive windowpane has blotted out the stars. Yet suddenly through the storm comes word of the majestic unity of all these heavenly bodies in the sonorous "One" of the steeple clocks, with whose voice the utmost star trembles in unison. God is *beyond* this movement and man's thought, but is "He" not "Himself" this great Unity, as the song of the title implies?

I'll sing you one-o.
(Green grow the rushes-o.)

What is your one-o?
One is One and all alone and evermore shall be so.

The poet joins the unity as he sings the One. But this moment of mystical fusion of man and the universe is foreign to the Biblical religion of the folk song, and perhaps to Frost himself. The gap between the One and man's particular historical actions is not bridged by the activity in history of a transcendent God; it is finally leaped only by irony, in the drastic plunge at the end of the poem from cosmic harmony to the absurd destructiveness of man:

It has not changed
To the eye of man
On planets over
Around and under
It in creation

Since man began
To drag down man
And nation nation.

The tolling of the sounds in the last lines summons the poet back to the chaos of earthly battle under stars blotted out by storm.²

Such a vision is never repeated; indeed it had already been discredited in "Bond and Free." There Thought, which "sits in Sirius' disc all night," seems to gain far less than Love, which clings to earth in the bondage-limitations of "hills and circling arms about—/ Wall within wall to shut fear out."

Yet there is something unsatisfactory in making it an either-or choice, splitting the natural polarities of the whole person. The natural movement is swinging between the two:

The most exciting movement in nature is not progress, advance, but expansion and contraction, the opening and shutting of the eye, the hand, the heart, the mind. We throw our arms wide with a gesture of religion to the universe; we close them around a person. We explore and adventure for a while and then we draw in to consolidate our gains. The breathless swing is between subject matter and form.³

The "I Will Sing You One-O" tendency and the "To Earthward" tendency are best resolved in the balanced swinger of birches. It is surely no accident that "Birches" directly follows "Bond and Free" in *Complete Poems*. When earth is too much like a pathless wood, the swinger of birches will climb a tree in that wood "toward heaven." (In folklore the birch is the tree at the entrance to Paradise.) But no matter how selftranscending the upward trip may be, it gives pleasure because it is temporary; the poet is sure he controls the return to earth and selfpossession within its commonplace life and limitations.

II

The mock-danger of being snatched permanently to heaven in "Birches" is related to the fear of being "carried away" from self-possession into commitments, as well as the fear of death with doubts about one's final destiny. The poet's resource for protecting himself

² I am indebted to Edwin H. Cady, Indiana University, for suggestions on interpreting this poem, and to both him and James M. Cox, Dartmouth College, for suggestions on this article as a whole.

³ Frost, "The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 1925.

against both fears and supporting a selfcontained skepticism is form and limit. The form of a poem can make a joke, play with a tricky argument by analogy or simply withdraw from commitment by a distancing in tone or idea at the end of a poem.

In "The Strong Are Saying Nothing," the spring planting scene is bleak except for the precarious existence of the plum blossoms. Yet the act of planting represents a tremendous investment of faith in the future. Is it a good risk?

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

The greater distance in tone and level of generalization in the last two lines and the stoic restraint in diction and attitude are a costly achievement in view of the perennial human urge to resurrection. In a sense Frost has learned to answer the wistful prayer in his early poem, "A Prayer in Spring." He never repeats either that poem's childlike trust in a God who sanctifies man's love to His "far ends" or its fretting worry about the uncertain harvest. Form maintains a guarded ability to wait and see.

In the perfect balance of a fallacious argument the skeptic can throw his believing opponents off balance, as in "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight." The proposed faith in a "wholly other" God, persisting from the one time when He revealed Himself to man, is supported by the parallel of life persisting since the time of its origin. But when one rejects the theory suggested for the origin of life—spontaneous generation, from which the "sun-smitten slime" crawls away—the parallel is also undercut. And the faith too is primitive, the latest revelation being from the mountain god of the Burning Bush on Mt. Horeb. The argument- and faith-by-analogy finally appear as unsubstantial as the ray of sunlight the speaker tries to catch and as cold as the bush by which he idly sits.

In "For Once, Then, Something," the speaker sees only his "godlike" reflection in the well where others apparently see absolute truth. Just once he saw something white in the depths of the water. Truth?—then his godlike image is a hindrance. A pebble of quartz?—then the self is the highest he can know. In any case, if he strains to go beyond the limits of human knowledge, nature rebukes him

by threatening both the "absolute truth" and his self-possession; a drop of water blurs the whiteness and breaks up even his image. Skepticism is safer—and more fun.⁴

Frequently the Limitless or God seems a positive threat to self-integrity. To the barriers of "Triple Bronze," set up "between too much and me" must be added the fourth bronze in "The Fear of God." In that poem a determined humility may perhaps protect one from being humbled by a Reality even more devastating to selfpossession than one's fellow men. But a more straightforward guard against God is humor. Frost himself says humor is being on guard: "the very religious nature is not humorous, not on guard."⁵

For instance, in "Astrometaphysical," the fear of being finally unacceptable to God is translated into a Yankee trader joke. From the suggestion that his love of the heavens merits that his "scalp will in the cope/ Be constellated," the speaker laconically bargains down to the plain good deal: "send me up, not down." The exaggerated irreverence and double-edged satire of "Not All There" protect the implied author (who is not the "I") from having to affirm or deny the possibility of communication between God and man. Even in a "Cluster of Faith" couplet, humor is self-defense:

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

Recalling his reservations about even the possibility of God, the poet dares to seize the offensive, defining them as little jokes, and judging God's "joke" on him—presumably birth or life itself—as an offense requiring greater forgiveness. A penitent can enjoy a play against being overwhelmed.

III

"Play" with forms, however, has a more positive function. Giving up hope of outside help, man can use them in gaining mastery over part of the "too much" around him. As Frost says:

Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it is lost to the larger excruciations. I think it must stroke faith the right way....

The background is hugeness and confusion shading away from

⁴ My reading of this poem is indebted to Dan G. Hoffman, *Explicator*, IX, Item 17 (Nov., 1950), and of the previous poem, to Harry M. Campbell, *ibid.*, V, Item 18 (Dec., 1946).

⁵ Quoted by Sidney Cox, *A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* (New York, 1957), p. 114.

where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against this background any small man-made figure of order and concentration.⁶

The acceptance of limit is necessary to achieving form for this kind of grip on reality. Thus within close limits—a mythical, rural New England where social relationships are cut down to a minimum, a restrained “New England” language, and disciplined verse forms such as the sonnet—Frost is most successful in establishing himself and the poetic controlling and “keeping” of experience.

The witness tree in “Beech” marks the boundary of the property that can be cleared for certainty, “though by a world of doubt surrounded.” The poem, firmly bound together and bounded by the repeated “-ounded” rime, holds the line for the kind of truth that is established by wounding trees. Yet the “limitless trait in the hearts of men” (“There Are Roughly Zones”) has at least an unsophisticated spokesman in the companion poem “Sycamore,” where Zaccheus climbs a tree, going out on a limb to greet a reality that will threaten his old self-possession. The “Beech” approach to truth is clearly, but not simply, favored by the relative weight of these poems.

Similarly, Meserve, coming into the Coles’s living room from the blizzard in “Snow,” rightly appreciates their achievement of security and form:

You make a little foursquare block of air,
Quiet and light and warm, in spite of all
The illimitable dark and cold and storm,
And by so doing give these three, lamp, dog,
And book-leaf, that keep near you, their repose.

Yet this sheltered “clearing” also seems to the fanatic Meserve like a temptation to be a hibernating beast rather than a man risking himself to face the challenge of the storm—of God, he almost says.

Form, besides offering “a momentary stay against confusion”⁷ and a barrier to risky ventures, also offers a way out beyond oneself that may at least “stroke faith the right way.” Poems, like full human life, are a risk, the “will braving alien entanglements,” and an act of faith: “Unto these forms did I commend my spirit.”⁸

⁶ From an open letter to the *Amherst Student*, published March 25, 1935, quoted by Lawrence Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Thought and Art of Robert Frost* (New York, 1942), p. 188.

⁷ Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” *Complete Poems* (New York, 1949), p. vi.

⁸ Frost, “The Constant Symbol,” *Atlantic Monthly*, CLXXVIII, 50 (Oct., 1946).

Thus, a fairly recent poem, "Kitty Hawk," ventures farther than is typical for Frost, in celebrating man's boldest projection of his spirit into the material universe. Poetry, in both its youthful flights and its mature formgiving to reclaim the waste of man's experience, is a metaphor for science—man's physical flights and reclamation of material waste. Even Biblical metaphor is used to validate man's scientific leaps. From the first venture into the material, the Fall from the apple tree, Western religion has moved away from the "mere meditation" of the East, assuming man's "divine right" to have kingly dominion over the universe. And the most important proof of the significance of man's selfprojection through science and technology is God's own incarnation in the flesh!

But God's own descent
 Into flesh was meant
 As a demonstration
 That the supreme merit
 Lay in risking spirit
 In substantiation.
 Spirit enters flesh
 And for all it's worth
 Charges into earth
 In birth after birth
 Ever fresh and fresh.
 We may take the view
 That its derring-do
 Thought of in the large
 Is one mighty charge
 On our human part
 Of the soul's ethereal
 Into the material.

The gay use of Hebrew and Christian tradition in metaphors for man's scientific activities gives the sense of relating God, man, and nature in a purposeful stream of form-giving.

Of course, the sense of universal order and matching up of forms has been inherent in the "synechdochist" method throughout Frost's poetry (e.g., in "Stopping by Woods"), when a seemingly minor experience becomes a trope for an ever-expanding range of universal experiences. Unfortunately, no such triumph of form embodies the bold ideas of "Kitty Hawk." Its short rhymed lines

and whimsical part-colloquial, part-learned diction, so effective for epigram, eventually become tedious. Incidental jokes and reminiscences burden the slender frame so that it hardly gets off the ground, and it seems rather to be circling than making the progress it celebrates. We miss the "pitching into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion" that Frost sets forth in "The Constant Symbol."

The "Cluster of Faith" poems preceding "Kitty Hawk" in *In the Clearing* even more clearly affirm order and purpose in the universe, but they are trivial. Especially in "Accidentally on Purpose," the genuine ring of the final lines on "passionate preference" makes the earlier bald assertion of purpose sound forced and thin. "Stroking faith the right way" through form-giving finally comes to affirmations that destroy Frost's forms.

IV

Evidence that play with stargazing, swinging birches, making a clearing, or flying a plane is inadequate to the size of religious problems in Frost's awareness is the appearance of the masques on the Biblical themes of salvation and God's justice and mercy. That he manages to come out relatively uncommitted is due largely to the detachment in the masque form itself, with its brilliant artificiality and grotesque exaggeration.

In *A Masque of Reason*, we must be kept from taking God seriously even though the admirable Job wants to. For there is the strong possibility that God is himself created and sustained by man's spirit. Consequently, in the modern age, as is true with the devil:

Church neglect
And figurative use have pretty well
Reduced him to a shadow of himself.

When God appears after a thousand-year absence, he is tangled in an artificial Burning-Bush-Christmas-Tree which is a hodgepodge of men's forms of worship. His identity is established, not by a self-validating "I AM" but by Blake's portrait. Job has "emancipated" him from the necessity of following man's standard of reason and justice. But the first time Job's wife renewes the old challenge and asks for a reason, his rickety, prefab throne collapses. Fortunately

for God, Job defends him, even his weak resistance to the devil's temptation, with gracious tact.

The joke is on Job and all people who are embarrassed by having their God turn out to be inferior to themselves. However, Job can be seen as a hero in one of two ways: It may seem he tries to maintain the possibility of an incomprehensible "God beyond God" against his own artist's yearning for humanly understandable Reason and Design. And then on the other hand he has defended himself against the failure of God. There is nothing he cannot "find a formula for taking care of," such as the image of the snake that swallows its tail—the poet's kind of selfdefense. Even if the crypt of the mystery is empty, he knows "well enough to go ahead with." And the more uncertainty the more self-knowledge and meaning he can wring out of his struggle to save himself.

The courage called forth by man's *not* knowing may even be a part of the divine plan for human fulfilment, as in "The Trial by Existence." However, the evidence is weighted toward the conclusion that Job is left responsible for maintaining both himself and an arbitrary God. The absurd ending of the masque leaves his deepest questions untouched by God and abandoned by Frost. Instead of closing with even a balanced skepticism, the masque dribbles out into an idle futility.

In *A Masque of Mercy*, Jonah flees to the refuge of a non-believers' Greenwich Village bookstore, evading orders to prophesy against the city from a God he cannot trust to be unmerciful. Like Job, he sees the earth as meaningful only as a hard battlefield where the winners save their souls and the losers get no prizes. When the visiting psychiatrist Paul proclaims that all men's efforts are failures by God's standard, Jonah is shattered by the injustice. A sense of justice and logic has been the essence of his selfhood; but now Paul commands him to fling himself down and plead for God's mercy, which is the outrage on logic that Christ came to bring. Jonah hesitates when he sees that the way to "yonder shining gate beyond the world" is descent into the dark cellar and prostration before the crucifix there. In his reluctance to give up his old self, the cellar door is slammed and kills him.

Jonah seems like a wild-eyed intruder into the twentieth century from the days when God was believed to command men, pursue them, and provide a ship, a whale, a bookstore, a cellar, for their

redemption. But the Old Testament prophet's apparent failure to grasp Christian salvation may be an act of divine grace for the new world; it is like a play performed for the benefit of My Brother's Keeper and Jesse Bel, the "moderns" who try to patch up life with alcohol, psychiatry, and social reform. Keeper, the skeptical humanist, is impressed by the scene, recognizing in himself Jonah's stubborn insistence on just reward for moral effort; but he has no intention of entering the cellar of self-renunciation. He will keep close to his "fresh-water spring" of natural reason and risk the failure of being "lost in the woods"—even after Jonah's death reveals the great odds that his very best efforts will not be sufficient and acceptable to Heaven. Keeper's heroic human answer is Courage:

My failure is no different from Jonah's.
 We both have lacked the courage in the heart
 To overcome the fear within the soul
 And go ahead to any accomplishment.
 Courage is what it takes and takes the more of
 Because the deeper fear is so eternal.
 And if I say we lift him from the floor
 And lay him where you ordered him to lie
 Before the cross, it is from fellow feeling,
 As if I asked for one more chance myself
 To learn to say (*He moves to Jonah's feet*)
 Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.

The conclusion is an advance for Keeper to acknowledgment of God and of his own need for mercy (due to the unjust disadvantages of his situation), although he will not pay the price for receiving it. But it is a retreat for Paul from his injunctions to Jonah at the cellar door and from the Biblical Paul's confidence in Christ. Paul and Keeper will work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, without St. Paul's assurance that God is at work in them as well (Phil. 2:12-13). The ritual of placing Jonah's body in the cellar before the cross may be *as if* Keeper recognizes his own need for mercy. ("Play's the thing. All virtue in 'as if.'") It may also be conquering the religious demands of the play of Jonah by finishing it suitably. But that effort at form still leaves an uneasy tension between determined self-salvation and submission to divine mercy even to the final line of the masque.

Keeper dares not enter the cellar for himself and take the risk

of self-abandonment. That his reaction is Frost's own is indicated by an intensely personal poem which he sent to Louis Untermeyer in 1942:

To prayer I think I go,
 I go to prayer—
 Along a darkened corridor of woe
 And down a stair
 In every step of which I am abased.
 I wear a halter-rope about the waist.
 I bear a candle-end put out with haste.
 For such as I there is reserved a crypt
 That from its stony arches having dripped
 Has stony pavement in a slime of mould.
 There I will throw me down an unconsoled
 And utter loss,
 And spread out in the figure of a cross.—
 Oh, if religion's not to be my fate
 I must be spoken to and told
 Before too late!⁹

The images of the cellar are additions to the two early versions of this poem sent to Untermeyer in 1921; and the change in tone from morbid desolation to the lighter three-line retreat at the end is the slamming of Jonah's cellar door. Coming as they did after a decade of personal tragedy, the poem and Frost's accompanying remarks show courage and triumph: "I believe I am safely secular till the last go down—that's all.... I can't myself say how serious the crisis was and how near I came to giving in.—It would have been good advertising."¹⁰ Thus with a wink Frost finally dismisses the possibility of *losing* himself in order to find himself. The poet must be saved by *keeping* what he is in the forms he makes, or not at all.

Frost's major effort at selfsalvation by making and keeping is one of his greatest poems, "Directive." The quest of the poem starts with a retreat from the chaos of man's life to a region stripped to its essence by loss. The cellar holes symbolize defeat and the abandonment of humanity, as in *A Masque of Mercy*. Courage for passing them comes from art, in a cheerful song. The destination is the "original" brook near its spring; like the healing magical fountain

⁹ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York, 1963), p. 331.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Earlier versions of the poem appear on pp. 130-131 and 136.

or well in folklore quests, its water is the eternal element. The poet in a priestly role offers the sacramental waters to the reader-disciple in his makebelieve Grail, his poem or metaphor. He has salvaged the playhouse goblet from the discard of Time and kept it, just as he salvaged blank verse from old poetry for form, and the Grail and the Incarnation (in "Kitty Hawk") from old religion for metaphor. The goblet has been hidden for the salvation of only those who can grasp Frost's poetry, which is thus like the obscure parable of Christ (Mark 4:10-12).¹¹

The poet is almost a god to his readers as he gets us lost and then plays with our salvation. But essentially our salvation is like his own. It is the poem, the "momentary stay against confusion," that makes us "whole again beyond confusion." Not by descending into the cellar hole do we become whole, but like Keeper, by lingering *near* the cellar of others' defeats and playing with the religious implications of what is left, making new form out of it. Thus the Frost of the poems *saves* himself, though not in the Christian sense of being *rescued* by divine power for the transforming of self and world. Rather, he *preserves* and possesses his old self and a part of his hand-me-down world through the power of imagination. Within these limits he has achieved a triumph.

However, the poems that go beyond these limits, exploring the "further range" in religion, give signs of trouble in "risking spirit in substantiation." The three most ambitious poems of the last twenty years—"Kitty Hawk" and the two masques—emerge in uncertain or shallow forms. They dissipate strength in random wise-cracks, and *A Masque of Reason* even drifts off into a weak and frivolous non-conclusion. In these poems perhaps one can estimate the cost of the skeptical spirit's unwillingness to risk the commitments demanded in the "substantiations."

¹¹ On the goblet as poem-as-metaphor, see S. P. C. Duvall, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of *Walden*," *American Literature*, XXXI, 482-488 (Jan., 1960).

Frost's Poetry of Fear

Eben Bass

BOTH AS A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE and as an intruder on marriage, fear is a recurring theme in the poetry of Robert Frost. Since it is alien to love, it can threaten marriage through an outside person like the Stranger in "Love and a Question," but his identity varies from poem to poem. Fear is also a private, singly-experienced thing, as in "An Old Man's Winter Night," a poem that sees fear as related to nature. Nature itself is not fear, nor does it know fear (unless, as with the Old Man, it is shocked at him), but fear can grow out of man's relationship with it. A variant is the awe/fear response of human beings in the presence of nature as divinity ("Going for Water"), or it may be the threat of nature to reclaim human institutions—in various Frost poems nature fills in vacated cellar holes and abandoned roads. But in these matters human neglect is at fault, and the resulting fear is an unrealized expression of that fault.

"A Brook in the City" is about urban neuroses, but we shall consider fear that relates to Frost's "country things." This may be as it is experienced by persons together, or alone. An example of the former, "Going for Water," tells the love-shared experience of nature as deity. On a cool autumn evening, a couple whose well has gone dry seek a brook in their woods. They run to meet the moonlight coming up out of the trees, but then pause within the shadow: "And in the hush we joined to make/We heard, we knew we heard the brook."¹ The poem depicts a shared awe in the presence of the stream nymph. The couple were playing with the moon until they entered the darkness, which makes them listen for the brook before they look for it. They do so reverently, the mood in which one should meet nature. Failing in the proper encounter unbalances the awe and turns it into fear.

Something close to such fear is experienced alone in "The

¹ All quotations are from Edward Connery Lathem, ed., *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York, 1969).

Demiurge's Laugh." Though glossed as being "about science,"² this poem is also about nature because it takes place "far in the sameness of the wood" and in failing light. ("Going for Water" is set just within the wood, with the expected moonlight waning.) "I was running with joy on the Demon's trail,/ Though I knew what I hunted was no true god." The Demon rises from behind the speaker, however, and with a sleepy, half-mocking laugh, catches him by surprise. The "I" feels foolish at being caught, pretends to have been looking for something else, but then sits unnerved against a tree: the quarry catches the hunter in his full but false confidence. The "science" of the poem is the speaker's false certainty that he could track down the Demon-Demiurge, which itself is a false creator.

Both single and dual encounters with fear occur in another poem, "Snow." The Fred Coles, a calm-minded couple, face it differently from the way of Meserve, also married, who seeks out challenges that are at odds with his role as a family man. Mrs. Cole chides Meserve, a preacher, for his weird description of snow piled against the Coles' window, "looking in." Seen by the heroics-seeking male, nature is a horrid, threatening stranger. But Mrs. Cole does not fear Meserve's pulpit rhetoric. He will have to face his demon. "Snow" speaks for the husband Fred as well as for his wife. He jokes about her possessiveness; he wants to encourage Meserve to make the dangerous trip with his team of horses back through the snow to his home, rather than safely staying the night with the Coles. Fred sides with Meserve and male bravado, which means facing competitive danger—"Let the man freeze an ear or two, I say." Meserve should be free to prove himself against the snow, which is nature sought out as an enemy. Yet in the language of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," his "promises to keep" ought to be to keep alive for his family's sake, not to seek out an adventure. The delayed news of Meserve's safe arrival finds Fred less sympathetic with the male quest at the end of the poem than he was at the outset; he pretty much accepts his wife's remark, "What spoiled our night was to him just his fun." Meserve came to tell of the snow's danger, which he must go out to meet. He answers a call resisted by the speaker in another poem, "Storm

² In *A Boy's Will* (London, 1913). All glosses cited in this paper are from the 1913 edition; they are reprinted in Lathem.

Fear": in it the snowy wind, whispering and beast-like, calls "Come out! Come out!" And the man fears that he and his family, snowed in the next morning, won't be able to save themselves "unaided."

Male questing that runs counter to marriage also appears in a minor but unusual way, in "An Encounter." All but lost in a cedar swamp, the speaker finds an unexpected telegraph pole; then he wonders whether there is anywhere these days where one doesn't find poles and wires. He asks where it's "off for," and what news it carries ("if it knows"). Matching wits with its instant alert, Frost's "I" says he is not "off to" anywhere: "Sometimes I wander out of beaten ways / Half looking for the orchid Calypso." A nymph so-named kept Odysseus on an island for seven years, despite faithful, waiting Penelope, who was "keeper" in another sense. Frost's "I" seeks a wood nymph rather than one of the sea.³ The omnipresent telegraph takes away the glamor of his quest, however, just as in "Snow" the certainty of the telephone connection between the Coles' house and Meserve's obviates Meserve's snow mission, his challenge to fear.

Ideally, Frost says that love, for all its denial of freedom and gesture, provides safety that in itself is liberating. In philosopher's terms this is shown in "Bond and Free." A crux between the poem's opening and closing, the closing settles (tentatively) in favor of love. "Love" and "Thought" (the latter the abstract of wandering male enterprise) are set off at the outset as alternatives, with Thought as the preference:

Love has earth to which she clings
With hills and circling arms about—
Wall within wall to shut fear out.
But Thought has need of no such things. . . .

If the poem opens in favor of Thought, rhetoric turns the closing toward Love. The terms are still options, however, paired together somewhat like Frost's famous "fire and ice" alternatives.

Yet some say Love by being thrall
And simply staying possesses all

³ In "Flower Gathering" the man has left his lady in the morning, to wander in the fields and woods. At evening he returns, the only excuse for his absence being some gay but faded flowers. She is cool to him, and he asks whether she is "dumb because you know me not, / Or dumb because you know?" The flowers are a renewal of courtship, but the day-long absence with no other excuse is a kind of Calypso venture.

In several beauty that Thought fares far
To find fused in another star.

Philosophically true, perhaps, this is not so clear-cut in human situations. Although the gloss originally furnished for “A Dream Pang” describes a happily married couple (“He is shown by a dream how really well it is with him”), most of the poem tells of the fear in the dream. The man’s beloved follows him to the forest edge, but will not enter, because, “I dare not—too far in his footsteps stray— / He must seek me would he undo the wrong.” He dreams that hearing her he wanted to call back to her, and suffered a pang for not doing so. The poem ends with the wood waking, and the man’s discovery that she is with him after all. Still, the dream imagery suggests Young Goodman Brown’s dilemma, of penetrating too far into the wood, despite his wife’s entreaty that he not go there. The fear is that the speaker as a loner is at odds with his other role as husband and lover. This dream situation becomes reality in another poem called “The Thatch,” to be discussed below.

The private fear of the speaker in “Desert Places” is not his alarm at interstellar space; “I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places.” Frost does not, however, mistake his own loneliness for humanity’s. The “desert” of “Desert Places” is his own personal fear. In a cognate poem, “On the Heart’s Beginning to Cloud the Mind,” he is riding on a train at night crossing Utah. But he decides that this desert is not personal to him. True, the flickering light he sees from some distant home seems to be kept “by the people there, / With a Godforsaken brute despair.” Then he can tell that intervening trees cause the wavering, that the light is in fact steadfast, that “Matter of fact has made them brave.” Other lights have spoken to theirs, even if theirs is the last one kept burning.

Frost’s abstracted fear in “Desert Places” is personalized in “An Old Man’s Winter Night.” The old man lumbers noisily and late through empty rooms, forgetting what he is looking for. He scares the house with his thumping, at last even the outer night. Since human loneliness is a shock to nature, fear possesses it, not him. Whereas in “On the Heart’s Beginning to Cloud the Mind” Frost reassures himself that the cedar trees outside the one lighted farmhouse are not marshaling under a leader against it, his “Old Man”

seems to hold the outdoors at bay. The frightening thing about him is that he can not remember what it is he is "keeping." "One aged man—one man—can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside. . . ."

The fear-related role of trees in the preceding poems is central to "Tree at my Window." Here, both the tree and the speaker are tempest-tossed. Nature's "fear" and the man's stand opposed like mirror images, each the seeming reflection of the other, yet each with its own cause. "Your head so much concerned with outer, / Mine with inner, weather." The speaker will not draw a curtain over the closed sash between him and the window tree. Thus the tree has seen him taken and tossed as he slept, just as he has seen it, like him, all but lost in its outer weather. One of the "Hill Wife" poems also describes a tree close outside, but this one seems to be trying to get in. Her plight is close to the shock-incident in Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw," when the governess, seeing Peter Quint peering through the dining room window, rushes outside to apprehend him and stands in the same spot to peer in in turn and frighten the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose. The first stage of such fear is in Frost's "Old Man," who cannot "keep a house, a farm, a countryside," and it is his forgetfulness and vacancy which prevent this and shock the outdoors. James's governess typifies the second phase, of fear having doubled about and become its own mirror image, a reversal that mocks at its former self. Frost is careful, however, to keep the opposites at the window-mirror on their proper sides. Thus in "Tree at My Window," Fate is said to have put the heads of the tree and of the speaker "together"—but on opposite sides of the window; i.e., with "her imagination about her," Fate made the tree outer and the speaker inner.

Outer and inner play a larger role in many of Frost's domestic poems about fear. For example, married love is wrenched into a separated outer and inner in "The Thatch." The speaker is outside and alone "in the winter rain / Intent on giving and taking pain." An assault on the inner is shown by the man's saying, "I would not go in till the light went out; / It would not go out till I came in." Finally, he returns to the proper side of the window after he accidentally unsettles the birds from their nests in the roof thatch and worries about their too being frightened and dislodged into an "outer" place. The poem ends in a way that gives another, post-

dated pain to the inner side of the window. The speaker has heard that after he moved away the roof thatch decayed, “letting the rain I knew outdoors / In onto the upper chamber floors.” In another “outer” poem which is less painful, “Waiting: Afield at Dusk,” Frost writes to “greet her eye” who is “absent most”—that is, the “she” of domestic love who is by nature the inner, keeping creature. True, she goes with him to meet the “outer” in the poem “Going for Water,” but she is mainly the “bond” of “Bond and Free,” and she is the light protected by the thatch roof. The male needs to keep his touch with the threatening outer more than does the female, who by nature shuns it. When the inner “keeping” does indeed fail, all becomes outer, as in the poem “Ghost House.” Things go back to being wild; nature reclaims everything. Woods come back into neglected mowing fields, and although Frost appears to be joking in “Mending Wall” when he attributes a Birnam Wood maneuver to the pines and apple trees on opposite sides of the wall, nevertheless his poems often tell a dream fear of woods “coming across” or “closing in.” “Ghost House” describes a vacant cellar hole kept now by nature, just as the road nearby is overgrown. Despite this poem’s sweet-sad Georgian manner, there is a ghost in the title, and ghosts are uneasy spirits: uneasy in the terms of other Frost poems, because the inner is not being kept, of its all going wild into the outer.

Several poems show the man as outer by instinct, but tied to the “inner” wife by love. The misunderstanding in “Home Burial” has to do with what the wife saw through the window on the stairway: how her husband, with seeming indifference, lustily dug the grave for their child. Only after pressing the issue does he “see” the reason for her fear and depression when he notices her furtive looks through the window.⁴ But so far as she is concerned, he is still outer and does not see; he only looks; in fact, she almost seems to be wilfully preventing his attempts at seeing. She will not forget her grief, nor will she grant that he can know anything of it. Trying to reconcile her after she finally breaks into tears, he thinks

⁴ Randall Jarrell, in *The Moment of Poetry*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore, 1962), notes that the wife’s habitual, furtive glance out of the stair window not only accuses her husband’s gross indifference, but is also self-accusing. The husband’s family burial plot, which he likens to the size of a bedroom, subconsciously reminds her of the bedroom in which the dead child was conceived; and his grossly digging in the outer clay of the graveyard reminds her subconsciously of his impregnating her inner clay.

this release will make her easier, and (in what seems only a casual note), invokes the outer: "The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up? / Amy! There's someone coming down the road!" That someone is alien to their attempt at domestic, inner life; therefore Amy is not, in her emotional outburst, to be allowed to rush from the house. The poem ends with her present escape and his vow to bring her back by force, if necessary. His "outer" threatens by force to become inner, whereupon her "inner" becomes hysterical and reverses into an outer force (the mocking mirror image) somewhat after the fashion of James's governess when she rushes to the outside of the dining room window. What requires the husband to become inner is his wish to keep domestic troubles at home, and he has the moral advantage, seemingly, in that the wife has not allowed him on her side of the window, has not helped him to be, defies his wish to be, denies his ability to be.

The only casually mentioned threat of an outer "someone" in "Home Burial" becomes more serious in several other poems. The woman in "The Hill Wife" series is younger than the one in "Home Burial," and she has not had children, but the two would understand each other. "The Smile: Her Word" of the Hill Wife is in some ways also like the strange ballad-poem "Love and a Question." "The Smile," however, is from the wife's point of view. Troubled by a beggar who seemed to mock at her young marriage, she wonders "how far down the road he's got. / He's watching from the woods as like as not." The stranger who interrupts love, as the wife's fear, continues to threaten from his hiding place. She senses his real but veiled malice, which in another sense is her fear that her love for her husband will not be sufficient to make their marriage last. "Love and a Question" is a related poem, but told from the young bridegroom's point of view, and his fear is different from that of the Hill Wife. The Stranger of "Love and a Question" (Frost personified him with a capital S in a revision) asks a newlywed couple for shelter for the night. He has no visible belongings, only "for all burden, care." The bridegroom thinks it is not enough to give him "a dole of bread, a purse, / A heartfelt prayer," but then again he pauses at whether he should offer anything more. Should he "mar the love of two / By harboring woe in the bridal house"? He does not fear a lack in his own love (the fear of the Hill Wife), but is touched by the loneliness of the "outer"

male who craves for inner, domestic security even while by instinct he is also a wanderer, an outer person. The Stranger is the bridegroom's surrogate, while for the Hill Wife he can be only a demon lover luring her away from her hearth.

Like the windows that keep inner from outer in several of the fear poems, Frost's doors fill comparable roles. In the poem "Snow," which as we have seen contrasts male bravado with domestic security, the neglect of a door left open chances the outer threat to the inner. The telephone, also left "open" by neglect or haste, causes fear of the same danger. Hours after the venturesome Meserve left their home on his way back through the snow, the Coles receive a call from his wife asking whether he has gone yet. On learning that he has several hours ago, the wife pauses and leaves the telephone line open. The Coles are kept listening, and Fred's wife asks, "You can't hear whether she has left the door / Wide open . . . the fire's died and the room's dark and cold?" Fear of an open door (letting in what should be kept out) communicates itself over the telephone line, also left fearfully open. After some tense waiting, the Coles learn that Meserve has indeed made it home. Still, the fear of an unintended door remains strongly in mind.

Fear of what may lurk outside a closed door, especially at night, appears in a quite different poem, "Locked Out: As Told to a Child." An outsider, a stranger, is assumed to be seeking entrance. This is only a dream, however, and the idea of locking the flowers outside at night where they will be with the unknown makes the fear seem less serious than it may really be. The fear is the speaker's own, but "told to a child." "The time I dreamed the door was tried / And brushed with buttons upon sleeves. . . ." Outside, the next morning, he finds a nasturtium with a "bitten stem"; otherwise, the imaginary stranger did no harm. "I may have been to blame for that." The line in its present revised form⁵ leaves an air of mystery, to enhance the quality of fear itself. The original identity of the fear is more transparent: it is the speaker as he is when *he* is outside the door, and his outer identity arouses some alarm in his inner, keeping self.⁶ "Inner" and "outer" are being

⁵ It originally read, "I always blamed myself for that"; cited by Lathem.

⁶ Frost's poem "The Lockless Door" is a spoof on fear involving both a door and a window. When the fear of someone "outer" knocking at his lockless door gets the best of him, the speaker himself climbs out the open window. Then he climbs back in, to

used here in the sense of "Tree at My Window," with the additional possibility as in other poems of the self's partaking of either existence, but at some risk or danger when it does so. The same opposites, differently resolved, are seen from the Hill Wife's point of view in "The Oft-Repeated Dream." In this poem the branch of a dark pine tree brushes against her bedroom window. To her eyes, the tree is the stranger who threatens domestic love.

It never had been inside the room,
And only one of the two
Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do.

The earlier version of this poem refers to the dark pine as "he," more closely identifying it with the stranger lurking in the wood who (so the wife thought) had previously mocked at her young marriage. In the final poem of her series, "The Impulse," she wanders off "to break a bough / Of black alder" (an echo and acceptance of the dark pine's beckoning from outside her window). She never returns. She scarcely hears her husband calling for her, and rather than going back, only hides "in the fern." Although no demon lover is mentioned, her vanishing into the wood does complete the urge that lurks behind her fear in "The Smile," a poem about the compelling expression on the face of the outsider, which "never came of being gay."

The stranger is a bit more explicit, although still enigmatic, in a longer poem, "The Fear." This work has important ties with a shorter one, "The Draft Horse," although that poem is a parable, whereas "The Fear" is one of Frost's characteristic folk narratives, replete with dialogue. It tells of a farm couple who have returned home late at night in a horse-drawn buggy. Having arrived at the barn, the wife insists she saw a man's face close to the roadside in the bushes. The presumed stranger is part of that "outer" danger which can be avoided by the proper ritual of unlocking a dark house at night: one must rattle the key in the lock in order to warn "someone to be getting out / At one door as we entered at another." In her little poem "House Fear" the Hill Wife has a similar cus-

summon in the "whatever" was outside. He's amused at having "emptied my cage" in order to "hide in the world." There is a bit of Hawthorne's Wakefield in this, except that Frost makes his speaker promptly return and open the door from the inside.

tom: to rattle lock and key, and to "leave the house-door wide / Until they had lit the lamp inside." In "The Fear," however, the woman is braver, more decisive, than the young Hill Wife: she insists on taking the lantern by herself and seeking out the man she has seen. She does not want her husband to come; she will settle with the other man, alone; and she must settle things now, or she will always be afraid of his lurking about. She means to avoid the dilemma of the Hill Wife, who is doomed to feel watched from the wood by the smiling stranger. The brave wife of "The Fear" indeed finds the lurking man and calls him within the circuit of the lantern. Approaching, he says there is a boy with him, his son; therefore, he could not be a robber. He explains that they are stopping at a neighbor's, although he does not tell why they walk so late, in the dark. The wife calls on her husband Joel to understand; he does not reply; she drops the lantern and it goes out. Joel's failure to speak at the grimmest moment of his wife's self-doubt is ominous.⁷ His the name of a minor Hebrew prophet, he judges his wife by his silence.

Even more melodramatic is the stranger from the "outer" in "The Witch of Coös." In reprisal for his threat to a marriage, he is killed by the outraged husband, Toffle Lajway, and buried in the cellar of the farmhouse with the aid of the erring wife. Years later, the bones get restless and ascend the cellar stairs trying to get out. "The uncommonly deep snow has made him think / Of his old song, 'The Wild Colonial Boy,'" says the wife to Toffle, on the evening of the bones' attempted escape. The luring snow, opposed to security and domestic ties (as we have seen in "Snow" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"), speaks to the remains of the demon lover, just as the woman who counters him by a trick and turns him upstairs to the attic and traps him behind the attic door is known for her "inner" witchcraft. The function shown above of the door as barrier between inner and outer is neatly and ironically transposed in this poem. The dry, chalky rubbing of the bones behind the attic door at night is an obverse to the buttons imagined to be brushed against the door in the child's

⁷ The wives to whom a stranger beckons in these poems apparently grow out of Frost's own marital possessiveness. According to Lawrence Thompson, Frost never forgave his wife Elinor for letting him think that she still cared for someone else. See *Robert Frost, The Early Years, 1874-1915* (New York, 1966).

poem "Locked Out." The lover's bones are locked forever in, escaped from the damp cellar but tricked into the dry attic.

Whereas many of Frost's poems use domestic images to dramatize inner and outer impulses hidden behind fear, others do so by picturing fear through a trip and a destination. "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road" shows nature interfering with man's directed route. A subtle undercuts competence (and confidence) to reach its goals, but the poem ends with determination, even certainty, that man will meet and overcome obstacles. The speaker says the fallen tree is not meant to bar our passage to "our journey's end for good" but just to ask us "who we think we are" and to remind us of who we really are. The tree's "Making us get down" anticipates the dilemma of that darker poem "The Draft Horse," in which the couple are made to walk the rest of their night journey. Although that poem is more violent than "Tree Fallen," both show that man's will is accomplished only when he overcomes obstacles meant to humble his pride. To lose that sense of sufficiency induces fear, the mental counterpart to the obstacles themselves.

Another trip / destination poem, "The Times Table," alludes to the farmer's wife in a manner that makes one think of "The Draft Horse." In "The Times Table," the farmer rebukes his mare because she always wants to stop at a drinking place halfway uphill.

"A sigh for every so many breath,
And for every so many sigh a death.
That's what I always tell my wife
Is the multiplication table of life."

The saying may be true, notes Frost in ending the poem, but it is also a malediction—it will close roads, cause the abandoning of farms, reduce humanity, and "bring back nature in people's place." To measure out life is to diminish it. To measure the sigh of the mare (who after all has a star on her forehead) is an affront to the spirit of life.

In "The Draft Horse" the "we" who drove in "too frail a buggy" are a man and wife, if we take that poem as a parable on fear drawn from the narrative poem "The Fear." In the longer work, a buggy ride at night is guided only by a weak carriage lamp, and the wife is frightened by a man's face at the side of the road in the bushes. In the shorter poem, these details are intensified. The

“man who came out of the trees” is the white-faced figure the wife sees in “The Fear.” He is abrupt and drastic in the short poem, however, not merely a suggested threat: he seizes the head of the horse “And reaching back to his ribs / Deliberately stabbed him dead.” A fatal wound must follow the farmer’s remark in “The Times Table” because that remark measures out breath. Cynicism kills life, the spirit of which is breathed into us. Though the mare shows the star on her forehead as she turns her head back to the farmer (“straining her ribs for a monster sigh”), he only thinks of life-breath as measurable. Lack of faith in other circumstances (at night) becomes fear, personified in the deliberate stabbing at breath. A draft horse draws heavy loads—his work is accomplished in a flow of energy that costs heavy breathing. Thus when the heavy beast falls, breaking the shaft of the buggy, “the night drew through the trees / In one long invidious draft.” This is the only echo of “draft” from the title, and the word “invidious” suggests a jealous rivalry at work in the darkness. Fear (that grows out of doubt, cynicism) does violence to breath and life, then mocks it with a breath of ill will after it has killed it.

Unlike the couple in “The Fear,” the “we” of “The Draft Horse” remain together through the end of the poem, whereas Joel does not answer his wife’s distressed cry, even when she drops the lantern that disclosed the face of the stranger. As in “On a Tree Fallen,” the “we” have to get down from their vehicle; but to make matters worse, the night couple will have to “walk the rest of the way.” “Tree Fallen” describes a simpler more casual impediment. True, the speaker has no ax in the sleigh with him to chop away the tree, but the tree is merely a reminder, not a grim disaster. And the speaker’s concluding optimism in “Tree Fallen,” though an attempt is made to restate it in “The Draft Horse,” sounds naively idealistic in the night poem:

The most unquestioning pair
That ever accepted fate
And the least disposed to ascribe
Any more than we had to hate.

A draft is after all (in terms of “The Times Table”) a drain which may exhaust the supply. Perhaps the spirited optimism of “Tree Fallen” is too much for dark fate to allow (or for the darker fears

of Frost to tolerate)—hence the stranger (fear personified) out of the wood, who destroys the “too heavy a horse”—too much draft or spirited breath to be drawing so frail a buggy. Because the couple in the buggy were unquestioning, gave as little credence as they could to hate (a universe ruled by evil), fate makes them suffer for accepting things too easily.

The stranger, then, whether in Frost's domestic or travel poems, is hostile to marriage. He is the most common equivalent of fear. As a demon lover he tries to lure the wife away (“The Hill Wife,” “The Witch of Coös), or with the lure of adventure he tries to make the husband risk his life foolishly (“Snow”). Also, the tension we have noted in Frost's poems between inner and outer is in fact a contest between two halves of the self, which are only partly aware of each other, and whatever mutual awareness exists is competitive. In addressing this dilemma the Wakefield complex is a possible way out, but Frost's fear of this cold sort of answer is his worst fear. At all possible cost, the door / window must keep these halves separate and in balance. They can also be known in the sense of the Fire and Ice opposites, which are Love and Hate, but in some sense they are also Female and Male, Love and Thought. These forces are the most terrifying when they get on the wrong side of things, and Frost uses all his power and control to keep them where they belong. The husband's final threat to Amy in “Home Burial” is not merely brutal and sexual; it states an essential rule for keeping the inner from getting lost in the outer.

Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of "Oversound"

Tom Vander Ven

DON'T I BESEECH YOU say a word to anybody about my juvenile dream of Broadway," wrote Robert Frost in 1943 in a letter to his good friend, Louis Untermeyer.¹ Frost's personal reputation has so changed today, can one avoid an interpretation of the ulterior in that line? Actually, he was thinking of prospects of Broadway for his pair of masques, *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), on which he was then at work. Of course, the literary efforts of his life had with few exceptions taken form in poems to be read, not in plays to be staged, but Frost believed that he heard and wrote poetry as drama, performed first by the poet and then by the reader on the theater of the page. He never spoke of dramatic art as theater art. Rather, he was concerned with the dramatic qualities of writing, how to give to the reader through the medium of the printed word the illusion of dramatic action and presence. Among the few essays Frost wrote, the hundreds of letters, the published lectures, the interviews, and the conversations, there occur again and again brief remarks and whole discussions on the dramatic nature of life and the dramatic elements of poetry. In his published work he never achieved a single and thorough formulation of his dramatic principles, but one discovers, by bringing together the many statements he made over some fifty years, an intense and continuous reflection on a wide range of dramatic concepts.

Most often his treatment of poetic principles was offhand and annotative. He liked to read his poetry and weave around it short notes on what he felt was happening in the poems:

Now this is another kind of thing. Before I say it, I want to say to you

¹ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1963), p. 333.

this does something that I don't usually approve of, like a statistical thing, sentence after sentence the same. You see, you just watch how. . . .

He would declare and could himself believe—

See the tone of that.

He could himself believe, he would aver
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly—

See, another tone.

Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds' song be the same
 And to do that to birds was why she came.²

Precisely what constitutes the "statistical thing" he does not usually approve of in poetry is not immediately clear beyond the apparent series of grammatical parallels. "See, another tone," he says, but what the tone is, what makes it distinct from the preceding lines, is left to the audience—not much to build on here.

But do Frost's observations when pieced together form any sort of extensive and consistent dramatic theory? Had he been asked such a question, Frost might have said, as he wrote in 1913 to John Bartlett, "I am one of the few who have a theory of their own upon which all their work down to the least accent is done."³ Frost felt then, at least, that his poetry was directed by a system of principles, though the system was not in that letter identified. Sixteen years

² Robert Frost: *Yale Series of Recorded Poets* (New Haven: Carillon Records, 1961), Side 2, Band 1, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." *Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949* (New York, 1949), p. 452.

³ Margaret Bartlett Anderson, *Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship* (New York, 1964), p. 59.

later, his “preface” to his one-act prose play, *A Way Out*, began, “Everything written is as good as it is dramatic.”⁴

The spirit of these two claims reveals itself over the years in the frequency and consistency of Frost’s comments on poetry. First, Frost had attitudes about his art which form a theory of poetry. Second, a dominant element in that theory is his belief that to be good, writing must be dramatic. The unit of writing he most frequently discussed he called variously the “sentence-sound,” “sound-posturing,” and the “sound of sense.” This unit he regarded as the primary dramatic element in poetry: “The sentence is everything.”⁵

How can the sentence be everything? To appreciate the importance which Frost assigns to the sentence-sound, one must understand that Frost’s use of the term is quite distinct from the conventional uses of the words “sentence” and “sound.” When he defined a sentence as “a sound . . . on which other sounds called words may be strung,”⁶ he was saying that a sentence-sound is not merely a pattern of word-sounds; it is an entity distinct from the cumulative sound of words; it “often says more than the words.”⁷ While the eye reads the words, the ear hears the sentence-sound: “*The ear does it.* The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.”⁸ Here are some sentence-sounds Frost once listed but did not label:

My father used to say—

You’re a liar!

Put it there, old man! (Offering your hand)⁹

Even without detailed contexts, the tones can be identified with some safety: moral instruction, anger, and friendly enthusiasm, respectively. In the first example the words taken as units with literal meanings are bluntly factual—a reference to a past experience. But Frost claims the phrase has a sound beyond this meaning. One hears the tone of assured, even reverent memory of father’s moral wisdom. That sound is, in part, signalled for the reader in this and

⁴ From introduction to E. A. Robinson’s *King Jasper*, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York, 1966), p. 13.

⁵ In *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York, 1964), p. 151.

⁶ Bartlett, p. 81.

⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

⁹ Ibid.

the other examples by very common, recognizable idioms with recognizable applications. He is, in fact, dependent on their being conventional in these examples, since he has no context which might modify or even reverse the tone. For example, "You're a liar!" might be said between friends with a laugh. In such a case the pleasant tone of the situation is played off against the conventional anger of the words. The reader could get the joking tone if given that context. Frost, therefore, is speaking of the sentence-sound as a voice tone which conveys an attitude and meaning beyond the immediate individual values of the separate words which make up the unit.

It is not, however, the recognizable idiom in a conventional or anti-conventional application which is the basis for the sentence-sound. For example, the common imperative idiom, "Don't tell me . . .," has a kind of prefix function the *sound* of which varies considerably according to the context. No single grammatical analysis of sentences based on that prefix could discover the different sentence-sounds possible. First, the structure has little, if any, literal meaning, as this brief dialogue based on the idiom's literal value illustrates (freely after comedian Don Adams):

Detective: Don't tell me we've lost that madman's trail.

Patrolman: We've lost that madman's trail.

Detective: I thought I asked you not to tell me that.

The idiom, then, is not a literal imperative requiring a direct response. Rather, it is an emphatic form expressing an emotion, to which the actual grammar of command demanding a precise response is not even relevant. Furthermore, there are varieties of emotion and emphasis possible within the idiom:

Don't tell me you're going down in that pit again
(pleading, or possibly disgusted)

Don't *tell* me the office is *closed* already.
(surprised, even disbelieving)

Don't tell *me* I'm impolite to your family.
(offended and accusing)

Even the idiom is only a words-unit, quite a different entity from the sentence-sound, the dramatic feeling Frost thinks good writing must have. The sentence-sound, then, is neither the cumulative

sound of individual word meanings, nor the sound of recognizable word patterns—idioms.

The sentence-sound is more than the sound of words and idioms. According to Frost, it can, as in irony, have an opposing meaning.¹⁰ “Speech is . . . distinct from thought and the proof is that the one may be utterly at variance with the other and the thought be no less definite.”¹¹ There are, however, two forms of ironic statement, only one of which illustrates Frost’s meaning.

When one exclaims, “What a beautiful day!” or “That’s a fine idea!” the tone may be enthusiastic, that is, consistent with the words. If the day is, however, unquestionably miserable and dreary, or the idea is obviously foolish, the ironic meaning derives not from the feeling expressed, but from the context. In such a case, the reference, or the environment of the sentence, says more than the words. This is not an ironic sentence-sound. What Frost does mean by irony of sentence-sound is the tension contained within a sentence. In the next room, a man replies on the telephone in tones of boredom, “That was the most exciting story I’ve heard in months.” We do not hear the story. The central meaning of the remark lies in *how* the speaker says it. Without knowing the story referred to, that is, the environment of the remark, and without the signal of any familiar idiom, and most importantly—in contrast to the meaning of the words themselves—we hear what the speaker feels, the thing Frost calls sentence-sound. (The immediate problem this point raises, to be treated later, is this: the sentence-sound is the heart of good writing, according to Frost, and yet it is one element—*the actual sound of the human voice*—which cannot appear on the printed page.)

Even though Frost has said that irony shows that—by the very opposition of speech and thought—the two are distinct, still it is true of irony that while there is opposition between tone and meaning, the two are still interdependent; that is, the listener who hears tones of boredom in “That is the most exciting story I’ve heard in months,” hears the tone of boredom deepened, colored with criticism, even insult, by the contrast of tone with idea. Frost claimed, however, that it is possible to have sense without sound as well as

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

¹¹ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 27.

sound without sense.¹² He felt that a lot of writing is only sense without sound, and once illustrated such writing with this example:

The cat comes into the room.
I put the cat out.
The cat comes in again.¹³

Bad writing lacks the tones of people with feelings. Its author presents an event flatly, not caring, or at least not showing he cares about it. The reader cannot, therefore, be expected to care either. Frost transformed the example to give it vitality, the sound of sense:

There's that cat again.
Get out, you cat!—
What's the use?

The event now has feeling, a human and personal point of view. Furthermore, there is not one sound, but a progression—from irritation, to angry action, to frustration and resignation—sounds of sense working together.

Finally, while the sound of sense is necessary to a good poem, it is not equivalent to the poem as an art form. It occurs in both poetry and prose and is, therefore, something distinct from a regular metrical structure:

Verse in which there is nothing but the beat of the metre furnished by the accents of polysyllabic [*sic*] words we call doggerel. Verse is not that. Neither is it the sound of sense alone. It is a resultant from those two.¹⁴

The sound of sense is the necessary source and heart of a poem, but the poet works his art, creates the beauty of form, *upon* it: sentence sounds “are only lovely when thrown and drawn and displayed across spaces of the footed line. Everyone knows that except a free verster.”¹⁵

To this point, then, the entity which is Frost’s sound of sense is not individual words, it is not word patterns, it is not metrical rhythm, nor is it context, i.e., a situational reference. Neither is it

¹² Bartlett, pp. 52–53.

¹³ Robert S. Newdick, “Robert Frost and the Dramatic,” *New England Quarterly*, X (June, 1937), 262–263.

¹⁴ Bartlett, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 192.

thought, since there can be sense without the sound. What remains is to say what it is, what entity is left when all these elements of communication are stripped from it.

According to Frost,

The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words. Ask yourself how these sentences would sound without the words in which they are embodied:

You mean to tell me you can't read?
 I said no such thing.
 Well read then.
 You're not my teacher.

He says it's too late.
 Oh, say!
 Damn an Ingersoll watch anyway.

One-two-three-go!
 No good! Come back—come back.
 Haslam go down there and make those kids get out of the track.¹⁶

Frost's proposal is, of course, not a valid test. He asks the reader to imagine the tones of these speeches through a door without the words; but to determine the tones the reader must evaluate the meaning of the words Frost gives him—a process nearly the reverse of what Frost claims will demonstrate the sound of sense. You cannot work Frost's test on paper; it calls for the actual feelings of the human voice—without the sense. The proposal can at best remind one of some argument, for example, between one's parents, overheard but muffled by a wall—when they thought their child was asleep.

The sound of sense, the fundamental emotional energy of human nature, is what Frost felt mattered in human behavior; without it poetry does not matter. Feeling is behind everything that counts in a man's life. Frost believed this of the world: "Really arguments don't matter. The only thing that counts is what you can't help feeling."¹⁷ And Frost believed this of himself: "I can always find something to say against anything my nature rises up against."¹⁸

¹⁶ Bartlett, p. 53.

¹⁷ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 135.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Once he said he was reluctant to join Mencken, Dreiser, and Lewis in "out-and-out satire": "I am conscious of my resentments as being merely personal and so not to be trusted to build a cause on."¹⁹ Another time he argued that any man's "humor shows fear and inferiority. Irony is simply a kind of guardedness."²⁰

Sometimes I have my doubts of words altogether and I ask myself what is the place of them. They are worse than nothing unless they do something, unless they amount to deeds as in ultimatums and war crys [sic]. They must be flat and final like the showdown in poker from which there is no appeal. My definition of literature would be just this, words that have become deeds.²¹

Uneasy at times about the value of any words, Frost could still insist that poetry have at its heart the pure, almost physical energy of human emotion—and with this strength the vitality of deed and of created physical objects, "the sonnet, the story, the vase, the portrait, the landscape, the hat, the scythe, the gun."²² Despite the implied equality of these "deeds," he said that the deed of art came short of risking one's life in an act of faith: "To *fight* is to leave words and act as if you believed—to *act* as if you believed."²³ In 1943 he wrote that "most people believe in this war only whereas I believe in any and all wars. I mean I sympathize with any and all brave people who go out to die for causes. They are the great boys, beside whom I am nothing."²⁴

The sounds of sense Frost said he tried to get into his poetry were more diverse and less violent than ultimatums and war cries, though certainly he meant them to be as immediately recognizable. Among his many "definition" statements is the definition of poetry as "all the different intonations of 'oh' and the context written around them."²⁵ "Think of what 'oh' is really capable: the 'oh' of scorn, the 'oh' of amusement, the 'oh' of surprise, the 'oh' of doubt, and there are many more."²⁶ The choice of "oh" as example is con-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

²¹ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, p. 10.

²² *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 270.

²³ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, p. 10.

²⁴ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 507.

²⁵ Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," *American Literature*, IX (Nov., 1937), 296-297.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

sistent on two counts with Frost's other definitions of the sound of sense. First as exclamation, it is the commitment of *feeling* to sound. Second, it is a pure vehicle of feeling, carrying no meaning except that given it by the tone of the speaking voice.

Even the simple declarative sentence is a kind of "oh," but, wrote Frost, "it mustn't be worked to death."²⁷ Since his sonnet, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same," treats as subject matter the sound of sense, Eve's "tone of meaning" picked up by the birds "without the words," it is surprising that it lacks the variety of sentence sounds, according to Frost, which he usually likes to get into poetry—it is "like a statistical thing, sentence after sentence the same."

He would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds' song be the same.
 And to do that to birds was why she came.²⁸

After he read the first line on that occasion at Yale noted earlier in this discussion, he paused and said, "See the tone of that." Apparently he meant the "statistical" tone, a straight, declarative low-energy tone. He then appeared to begin again, but changed the line to, "He could himself believe, he would aver," as if to show the flatness of the tone by the ease with which words could change position and be substituted with no change in tone or meaning. The first five lines are, in fact, all the one tone, the tone of declaration and of reflective thought, a gentle tone in itself, and, moreover, removed a step from the active voice of thought by Frost's committing himself in the opening line to the third person reference and the "would . . .

²⁷ Bartlett, p. 53.

²⁸ *Complete Poems of Robert Frost: 1949* (New York, 1949), p. 452.

could" structure. Had the poem begun with the second word of the second line, i.e., "the [song]birds there in all the garden round," the tone of voice, though still declarative, would have sounded more direct as the immediate thought of the narrator. Just such a tone begins at line six. In reading the poem, Frost began the line, "Admittedly," then paused. "See, another tone," he said, and went on to finish the poem. Not only do lines 6-8 interrupt the current of the ideas with a qualification, the interruption is reinforced by a tone shift from observed thought to active thought. Line 9, though it remains in the active tone of thought, gives another shift, "Be that as may be," a return to the first motion of the idea, a tone of concession to the interruption, "All right, I grant your qualification, but my point is still sound." There is, then, a tone shift in the poem, after the "statistical" first five lines, a light shift of a musing mind, which concedes a point, then reaffirms and extends the opening discussion.

While the kinds of tones possible for a poet to get into poetry would appear to be limited only by the boundaries of human feeling, Frost was interested primarily in sentence tones "that if you can judge from the practice of other poets are not usually regarded as poetical."²⁹ He was both a poet of action—"Literature is words made deeds"—and a poet of reaction—against

those sentence tones that suggest grandeur and sweetness everywhere in poetry. What bothers people in my blank verse is that I have tried to see what I could do with boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones (for there are such) and forty eleven other tones. All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that haven't been brought to book. I don't say to make them, mind you, but to catch them. No one makes them or adds to them. They are always there—living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: they were before words were.³⁰

The tones he wants are the common speaking tones of life, not tones which the poet creates. Such tones which "no one makes" and which "were before words were," must be, therefore, common to man, enduring and universal, and significant for their very permanence and commonality, not for their grandeur and sweetness.

As the universal feelings of the race, sentence sounds are in themselves "definite entities. . . . as definite as words. It is not impossible

²⁹ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p. 191.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that they could be collected in a book though I don't at present see on what system they would be catalogued."³¹ The proposal of a dictionary of sentence tones makes sense here primarily as a figure for Frost's theory. He never, so far as I know, advanced the idea even so far as an organizational plan, though the body of his poetry, perhaps, amounts to an anthology of sentence-sounds. He was thinking of the poem as a kind of sentence-sound definition when he wrote, "the object of writing poetry is to make all poems sound as different as possible from each other."³²

When Frost said sentence-sounds "were before words were," he was speaking literally of primitive man: "gesture made primitive man convey a meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language."³³ Frost wanted to reach back for that primitive, elemental force, and energize his poetry with words that bleed when cut. Apparently he believed the sounds of sense in the vibrations of the cords of the human voice were the communication symbols closest to their referents, the flesh of the physical man and his personal experiences and memories:

In primitive conditions man has not at his aid reactions by which he can quickly and easily convey his ideas and emotions. Consequently he has to think more deeply to call up the image for the communication of his meaning. It was the actuality he sought.³⁴

Frost seems to mean by "reaction," words, in the sense that they are reactions to experience, established symbols which represent a man's (or society's) experiences, and what he has perceived about those experiences. The more thorough and precise the vocabulary, that is, the more complete the meaning which is carried by the symbol, the less the communication depends on the tone of voice. Primitive man without such symbols had to reach into himself for the actual feeling and communicate that feeling *by dramatizing it with the sound of his voice*. Primitive communication relied heavily on performed meaning, the speaker physically engaging himself in acting out his meanings by vocal tones.

³¹ Bartlett, p. 82.

³² Selected Prose, p. 17.

³³ W. S. Braithwaite, "Robert Frost, New American Poet," *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 8, 1915, Pt. 3, p. 10.

³⁴ Ibid.

Seizing Frost's theory at this point, one might argue that he has demonstrated that the modern writer does not need sentence-sounds in order to communicate, since he has a complex and precise language. Here Frost's theory of poetic action connects fundamentally with his reaction as a young poet against current conditions of poetry. Frost's comment, "What I would like is to get so I would never use a word or combinations of words that I hadn't heard used in running speech,"³⁵ insists on actuality in a profound way. Because modern language is so complex, because it is based on a long and diverse history of race experience, ideas, dogmas, and specialized word systems (e.g., philosophies and scientific disciplines), the writer who attempts to write down the intensities of his own experience and understanding must face the task of *selecting* the language that lies closest to his experience. Primitive man lacked language and had to look into himself to recreate the meaning he wanted to communicate. Modern man, with too much language, must still search for an effective means to communicate, but his efforts are efforts of selection from the mass of language already created. Frost saw danger in abstraction, language removed from its source. Sidney Lanier's poetry with its musical notation of verse exemplified, in Frost's view, defective selection. Applying music theory to language, Lanier's work was no longer firmly rooted in human experience.³⁶

"Everything written is as good as it is dramatic." Looking over Frost's remarks on the principle of the sentence-sound, one can begin to see the depths of that statement. The printed word communicates, is credible and persuasive, only as it is charged with the sound of sense, the elemental, emotional energy of a human being who feels so intensely and completely what he has written, that it is *an act of faith, word become deed.*

At the center of this dramatic situation is a paradox. The very quality which Frost insists must get on the printed page is the very quality which cannot itself, by its very nature, get there. He has himself emphasized that the sound of sense is distinct from word, idiom, meter, idea, and physical environment. Yet the poet's task, according to Frost's theory, is to take the tones of the human voice, the vibrations of feeling, where they cannot go themselves. The poet's art,

³⁵ Bartlett, p. 75.

³⁶ Braithwaite, p. 10.

then, must be to construct out of printed language a vehicle which can carry a precise sound of voice to the reader's ear. In view of the paradox, the meaning of Frost's claim, "it does not seem possible that a man can read on the printed page what he has never heard,"³⁷ suddenly becomes clear. A poem is not a sound of sense itself but the context for one. Given a context of signals which indicate fear or doubt, the reader will experience the sound of fear or doubt in the poem only if he has actually heard those sounds carried on the human voice.

Related, then, to Frost's belief in the "sound of sense" is his concern with "recognition" in literature: "In literature it is our business . . . never to tell . . . [people] something they don't know, but something they know and hadn't thought of saying. It must be something they recognize."³⁸ Recognition functions not merely as a sharing of ideas between poet and reader, but as a sharing of voice tones, a dramatic bond. The burden of communication is, as it must be, a shared burden. While the poet's task is to provide the signals for the sound of sense, the reader's burden is equally critical. He must read the signals well as references to a tone that is not there. A poem works, therefore, when the reader has lived and is capable of recognizing in his own experience the poem's vocal tones, since, according to Frost, the tones are elemental and universal to the race.

Frost does not, of course, regard the poet as merely a recording secretary for mankind. He uses the sounds and expressions of his own voice and so writes of himself as well as of others.³⁹ At the same time, this voice should be no less recognizable than the voices of others if it is the voice of elemental human feeling.

Frost's dramatic theory of the "sound of sense" invites the reader to turn again into his poetry to hear the lovers' quarrel of inner voices in a dramatic lyric such as "My November Guest." Of this poem Frost asked, "Did you know at once how we say such sentences as these when we talk?

She thinks I have no eye for these . . .
 Not yesterday I learned etc.
 But it were vain to tell her so."⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bartlett, p. 82.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

In this poem the dramatic quality of the moving, changing sentence sounds grows out of the way that Frost in the opening line has personified as a companion character an attitude of his own mind, "My Sorrow."

Or turn to the reined-in complaint of Fred to his wife in the philosophical dialogue, "West-Running Brook":

"Oh, if you take it off to lady-land,
As't were the country of the Amazons
We men must see you to the confines of
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,—
It is your brook! I have no more to say."

Frost would say, "See the tone of that."

Or turn to Amy's grief and anger toward her husband in the dramatic dialogue, "Home Burial":

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the bannister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"
"Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"See, another tone."

Perhaps the best word Frost found for these tones—signalled by all the language arts available to the poet in the act of transcribing the voices of his mind onto the page—tones heard not on the page but somewhere suspended above it, is "oversound," the human feeling Eve's voice gave to birds' song in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." Oversound hovers, glides, dives among the words but never lights to be pinned, wriggling on the page.

Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens: "What to Make of a Diminished Thing"

Todd M. Lieber

I

ROBERT FROST AND WALLACE STEVENS have long been recognized as two of the most important twentieth-century American poets, but scholars have made little effort to examine the relationships between their work. The critical tendency has been to portray them as opposites or at least as representatives of divergent "schools" of poetry and poetics.¹ This tendency has been unfortunate; for, despite the fact that Frost and Stevens took little interest in one another's work, and although the styles of their poetry differ greatly, their sense of what they were about, and of its importance, was essentially the same. By recognizing their commonality it is possible to learn a good deal about the imaginative activity that underlies and unifies diverse poetic idioms.

The similarity between the two poets springs initially from the common environment in which they wrote. As twentieth-century men they shared twentieth-century concerns, and like most serious contemporary writers they faced the problem of coming to terms

¹ Lawrence Thompson, for example, mentions Stevens as a young poet influenced by Eliot and Poe toward an "art-for-art's-sake" doctrine, maintaining that "poetry has nothing to do with practical or moral ideas," in contrast to Frost, who leans toward Emerson's "art-for-wisdom's-sake." See *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York, 1961), p. 12. Roy Harvey Pearce, in *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, N.J., 1961), recognizes the closeness of Stevens to Frost (see p. 427); but in his broad groupings Frost is a "stock-taker" whose poems represent "a pause . . . in the continuity of American poetry" (p. 273), whereas in Stevens "the continuity of the most deeply rooted tradition of American poetry . . . reaches the point of no return" (p. 376). The lack of interest Frost and Stevens took in one another's work has probably discouraged comparative studies. Stevens's only published comment on Frost's poetry was that, "I do not know his work well enough to be either impressed or unimpressed. . . . His work is full (or said to be full) of humanity." *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 825. Frost expressed dislike for Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier" because he felt a "bawdy" poem should not purport to make me think." *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York, 1963), p. 17. And late in his career he disclaimed any sense of affinity with Stevens. See his interview with Richard Poirier, reprinted from the *Paris Review* (Summer-Fall, 1960) in *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York, 1966), p. 230.

with a world that seems to lack real spiritual significance, a world often visualized as a waste land. Monroe K. Spears has written in his recent book on modernism that in the twentieth century the "view of the present as a waste land, now that civilization is destroyed and human nature changed, becomes, with its wrenching sense of loss, the dominant myth."² The modern waste land is commonly perceived as cloven into inner and outer realms: an "objective" natural world, lacking meaning or intention; and the "subjective" worlds in which each individual exists alone. In sociological terms the vision is that of an alienated individual lost in the absurdity of a technocratic mass society. The challenge facing the artist has been the necessity of dealing with the loss of unity, order, and belief that seems to characterize the modern world; or, as Frost put it in "The Oven Bird," "what to make of a diminished thing."³

Frost and Stevens were primarily concerned with the metaphysical rather than the sociological dimensions of the waste land myth; for it was their inclination to view social conditions as the outgrowth of intellectual commitments. Each wrote poems that convey this "diminished" vision of the world: Frost, for example, in "Desert Places" and "Acquainted with the Night," with their suggestions of "an external emptiness awaking Frost to fear the abyss in his own soul";⁴ Stevens in the stark barrenness of winter soulscapes such as "The Snow Man" and "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters," which convey the sense of the mind as "the inner nothingness, while reality is the barren external world."⁵ But neither Frost nor Stevens reacted to the waste land vision with enduring pessimism, and ultimately neither poet accepted it as truth. They sought a more accurate vision of the self and the world. Searching not as philosophers but as poets, they found an alternative vision implicit in the experience of writing poetry. Each in his own idiom arrived at an understanding of poetic activity which enabled him to see poetry as a response and a corrective to the malaise of the modern spirit. I shall first briefly describe

² *Dionysus and the City: Modernism in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (New York, 1970), p. 33.

³ *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York, 1969), p. 120. All further references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text, preceded by the notation *PRF*.

⁴ James P. Dougherty, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' to the Wilderness," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer, 1966), p. 211.

⁵ J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in *The Act of the Mind*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore, 1965), p. 145.

this shared conception of poetry, then examine its most important characteristics through their embodiment in a few poems by Frost and Stevens, and finally attempt to summarize its significance as an alternative to the assumptions of the waste land vision.

II

Frost was no more eager than any other poet to define poetry, but when he spoke about it he generally used such phrases as: "a way of grappling with life," "a little voyage of discovery," "a way *out of* something."⁶ All these phrases represent poetry not as entity but activity, and, more specifically, as "a way," that is, as method. In the essay "Education by Poetry," Frost suggests that in coming close to poetry the student enters the world of metaphor and, through metaphor, learns what it is to think: "it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another."⁷ He is not speaking of trivial comparisons but the most profound thinking humans engage in. "Unless you have had your proper poetical education in metaphor," he writes, "you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history" (*SP*, p. 39). The figure Frost uses to describe metaphor in this sentence is itself worth attending to: we "ride" our metaphors. Metaphor should be construed not merely as an identification of resemblance but as an instrument used to get somewhere, a tool for thinking, the vehicle, perhaps, on which the poet undertakes his "voyages of discovery." Poems become methods of moving toward new insights on the strength of the poet's figures, dynamic activities in which, to quote Elizabeth Sewell, "the mind unites with a figure of its own devising as a means toward understanding the world."⁸ The process is that used by Frost's "God" in "A Masque of Reason." He says to Job: "You helped me / Establish once and for all the principle / There's no connection man can reason out / Between his just deserts and what he gets. . . . I

⁶ Lathem, *Interviews with Robert Frost*, pp. 58, 117, 173. See also p. 202.

⁷ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York, 1966), p. 41. All further references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text preceded by the notation *SP*.

⁸ E. Sewell, *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (London, 1960), p. 20.

should have spoken sooner had I found / The word I wanted. . . .
 We groped it out together" (*PRF*, pp. 475, 480). God and Job are agent and instrument working together to "grop out" the figures that make life comprehensible.

In one of his "Adagia" Wallace Stevens says much the same thing. He writes: "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give."⁹ A statement about the relation of art and life, this is also an indication of method, for art itself is the process in which "the mind turns to its own creations and examines them." Its creations are its concepts, its figures. "Poetry," Stevens says in "Effects of Analogy," "is almost incredibly the outcome of figures of speech or, what is the same thing, the outcome of the operation of one imagination on another through the instrumentality of the figures. To identify poetry and metaphor or metamorphosis is merely to abbreviate the last remark."¹⁰ Like Frost, Stevens views poetry, at least in one of its aspects, as a method of thinking, a way to enter the unfamiliar and the unformed, "the act of becoming engaged with something unreal" (*OP*, p. 239).¹¹ Poet and philosopher alike, Stevens says, form concepts in order to probe for an integration of experience, but "the philosopher intends his integration to be fateful; the poet intends his to be effective" (*OP*, p. 197). The poet, in other words, develops alertness to the potential usefulness of his figures for shaping reality in new ways.

This gives poems a certain doubleness, for their substance is both the figures the artist has shaped and his sense of the potential of those figures for further explorations. Stevens identifies this doubleness as "the true subject" of the poem and "the poetry of the subject":

⁹ *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York, 1966), p. 159. All further references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text preceded by the notation *OP*.

¹⁰ *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York, 1951), pp. 117-18.

¹¹ It should be noted that by "unreal" Stevens does not mean "non-existent." He gives as examples of such poetic acts, "looking at a photograph of someone who is absent," "writing a letter to a person at a distance," or, for a member of the middle class, "the act of thinking of the life of the rich" (*OP*, pp. 239-240).

One is always writing about two things at the same time in poetry and it is this that produces the tension characteristic of poetry. One is the true subject and the other is the poetry of the subject. The difficulty of sticking to the true subject, when it is the poetry of the subject that is paramount in one's mind, need only be mentioned to be understood. In a poet who makes the true subject paramount and who merely embellishes it, the subject is constant and the development orderly. If the poetry of the subject is paramount, the true subject is not constant nor its development orderly. This is true in the case of Proust and Joyce, for example, in modern prose. (*OP*, p. 221)

In Stevens's poetry the "true subject" is rarely constant and its development rarely orderly; for Stevens concerns himself centrally with "the poetry of the subject," the potential of his figures as instruments of thought. Canto 22 of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" helps to clarify Stevens's position:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.¹²

A paraphrase of the canto might read: *the poetry of the subject, whatever the subject might be, is the true concern of the poem. Within the poem itself there is "an absence in reality" because the poet is not dealing with things as they are but with their potential usefulness as instruments of discovery. But is the poetry of things really separable from the things themselves? Is it accurate to say that the poem withdraws from reality when in fact it asserts the reality*

¹² *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1969), pp. 176-177. All further references to this edition will be found in parentheses in the text preceded by the notation *CP*.

of the poetry of things?¹³ In the interaction of imagination and reality the poem draws on things as they are; perhaps it also gives to them new forms and shapes, new structures of intelligibility. The canto represents poetic method working on itself, as Stevens uses metaphor (issue, absence, return, intercourse, etc.) to inquire into some of the implications of poetry as a method of thinking.

III

Because of their concern with poetry as a process of inquiry, Frost and Stevens wrote poems designed to reveal poetic method and make it manifest to the reader. Like "The Man with the Blue Guitar," these poems are radically reflexive. They figure the act of figurative thinking and thus enable the reader to become involved in the poetic experience of the poem. Frost suggested that it is possible to "come close to poetry" as well by reading as by writing it, so long as it is read "not as linguistics, not as history, not as anything but poetry" (*SP*, p. 43). Stevens remarked in the "Adagia" that "to read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act" (*OP*, p. 164).¹⁴ Frost and Stevens utilize structure, diction, and grammar to incorporate method into the substance of the poem in such a way that the attentive reader will himself participate in or reenact the poetic mode of thought.

As an initial example, consider Frost's "The Lesson for Today," a poem that contains "statement, question, and method, at one and the same time."¹⁵ The question has to do with the alleged "darkness" of "this uncertain age in which we dwell" (*PRF*, p. 350). The opening lines suggest that it is not "really as dark as I hear sages tell," but the rest of the first paragraph considers what Frost would do if it were; and as he proceeds in the poem to do what he describes, he arrives at a basic ambivalence which it becomes the work of the poem to resolve. What he "would do," and does, is to engage in a hypothetical conversation with a medieval scholar. As he elaborates his

¹³ This speculation is central to the whole poem. In the early cantos of the poem the audience requires the guitarist to play "a tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (*CP*, p. 165). This, Stevens explained to Hi Simons, is "because that is exactly the way they are" (*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 359). Throughout, Stevens develops the idea that man exists fully in his figurative extensions of himself.

¹⁴ Cf. "Authors are actors, books are theatres" and "The reading of a poem should be an experience. Its writing must be all the more so" (*OP*, pp. 157 and 170).

¹⁵ Sewell, p. 4.

figure it suggests the commonness of man's sense of insignificance: "We both are the belittled human race, / One as compared with God and one with space. . . . One age is like another for the soul" (*PRF*, pp. 353, 354). Underlying the assertion of historical continuity, however, there remains the problem of responding to this diminishment. The structure of the poem embodies Frost's response; he creates a figure and uses it as a tool to shape an understanding of his situation. Although the language of Frost's "conversation" seems to work toward philosophical statement, the poem ends not with a logical answer to the question of the opening stanza but with a metaphor which figures the poet's uncertainty in a meaningful way. As opposed to "philosophical distention," Frost suggests: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world" (*PRF*, p. 355).

The same structural principle is evident in many of Frost's narrative and dramatic poems, where the persona or the dramatic characters engage in figurative thinking; to read the poem "as poetry" is to follow the process by which one figures experience and, to paraphrase Stevens, examines his figures for what they reveal and validate or invalidate. Diction and syntactical progression often direct attention to what is happening in the poem. In "Birches," for example, Frost introduces the figure with the phrase, "*I like to think* some boy's been swinging them," and he resumes it, after the interlude about the ice storms, with "*I should prefer* to have some boy bend them" (*PRF*, p. 121; italics added). The digression that separates these two phrases indicates that the figure of the boy is only one of several possible ways of understanding the appearance of the trees; but it is the one the poet finally chooses. As the figure is expanded and elaborated, the syntax becomes descriptive and declarative rather than hypothetical. Finally the figure is used to identify the proper relationship of man's spiritual and earthly concerns, and diction and sentence structure return to the subjunctive: "That would be good both going and coming back. / One could do worse than be a swinger of birches" (*PRF*, p. 122). "Birches" records thought in action, and throughout the poem the grammatical forms provide clues to the shifting activities of the thinker.

Many of Stevens's poems show a similar structure: a proposition is suggested, worked out, revised, sometimes dropped, sometimes resolved, sometimes left in ambiguity. Among the earlier poems, for example, both "Sunday Morning" and "The Comedian as the Let-

ter C" are structured by the interplay between the figures of a dramatic protagonist and experiences which challenge these figures. In the later poems personae tend to replace dramatic characters, but the structure remains essentially the same, that of the mind playing over a series of propositions, testing their usefulness. Like Frost, Stevens uses diction and grammar to make the reader aware of the process of thought in the poem. The grammatical progression is generally one in which a figure is presented as a hypothesis, by words such as "if," "when," "until," or a phrase such as "it may be," and the "hypothesis is continued, and vivified, and taken seriously as a vehicle for reflection."¹⁶ Often Stevens uses the imperative together with the subjunctive, as in poem nine of "Credences of Summer." The poem begins with a command that establishes the figure: "Fly low, cock bright, and stop on a bean pole." The figure of the bird in the abandoned garden is then used to make a statement—"A complex of emotions falls apart, / In an abandoned spot"—and to suggest further possibilities: "And on your bean pole, *it may be*, you detect / Another complex of emotions . . . , and you make a sound, / Which is not part of the listener's own sense" (*CP*, p. 377; italics added). To follow Stevens's use of these constructions is to experience an act of inquiry and thus to become aware of poetry as a method of thinking.

One of the most successful of Stevens's attempts to communicate this awareness is "The Idea of Order at Key West," for here the relationship that Stevens was trying to establish with the readers of his poetry is embodied in the poem by the relationship of the observers to the singer. She shapes the world in her song; and by attending to this process the observers are able to share not only in a particular ordering of experience but in "the idea of order"; thus they recognize that the activity is basic to their own human nature. This poem also reveals those essential characteristics of poetic method which led Frost and Stevens to reject the assumptions of the "waste land" world view. The poem transcends the generally accepted dualism that separates the self and the world and sorts things out into the categories of

¹⁶ Helen Hennessey Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 30. I am indebted to Professor Vendler for pointing out the frequency with which such usage appears in Stevens's poems. However, as will become evident, my interpretation of its significance is quite opposite from hers.

subject and object, mind and body, knowledge and belief, thought and feeling. The key lines in the poem are these:

She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, *the sea,*
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker.

(CP, p. 129; italics added)

In the activity of the singer, self and sea become one reality. Her song embodies the sea, making it intelligible, something more than “the heaving speech of air.” In the poem, phenomena themselves, not, as philosophic idealism would have it, a subjective image, are sensed clearly and directly. But they are not objects to be sensed or contemplated simply. In the poem they become instruments for shaping human reality. As Elizabeth Sewell writes, “a mind speculating in the poetic mode . . . draws into itself the very facts it is thinking about, so that it can not only think about them, but think with them. For poetry, all objects and happenings in the universe are for thinking with, and phenomena or events are always available to poetry as method, at the same time as they are available as objects of contemplation.”¹⁷

Furthermore, the instrument—the song that figures the sea—is one into which the singer has so extended herself that it has become part of her own person, “the self that was her song.” The singing involves passionate commitment on the part of the singer. Michael Polanyi suggests that this sort of commitment is present whenever a man uses a tool or an interpretative framework. He writes: “We pour ourselves into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.”¹⁸ Polanyi’s choice of “personal” as a better term than “objective” or “subjective” to describe the nature of the understanding that derives from this process seems an appropriate description of Stevens’s figure in this poem. Polanyi writes: “In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so

¹⁷ *The Human Metaphor* (South Bend, Ind., 1964), p. 68. This seems to me to be what Stevens implies in identifying his concern with “the poetry of the subject” as paramount to a concern with “the true subject.”

¹⁸ M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York, 1964), p. 59. There is no evidence that either Frost or Stevens was familiar with Polanyi’s work, but through poetry each came to an epistemological position essentially the same as Polanyi’s.

far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective."¹⁹ Stevens keeps constantly before him the "veritable ocean"; but he sees equally the central role of individual passion, "the maker's rage to order words of the sea" (*CP*, p. 130).

IV

The vision revealed in "The Idea of Order at Key West" looks further toward two particular propositions. The first is that phenomena themselves are vital to man's method of thinking about both them and himself, that epistemologically the self and the world are not separable. The second is that knowledge requires an act of personal commitment to one's instruments of thought.

In Canto 28 of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens asserts:

I am a native in this world
 And think in it as a native thinks,
 Gesu, not native of a mind
 Thinking the thoughts I call my own,
 Native, a native in the world
 And like a native think in it.

(*CP*, p. 180)

Stevens rejects the notion that man is "native of a mind." As man thinks with his instruments—his songs, his figures, his poems—, so thought itself must be understood to be taking place within the world and not, as Plato or Descartes assumed, in a mind separate from the world. Canto 28 concludes:

Here I inhale profounder strength
 And as I am, I speak and move
 And things are as I think they are
 And say they are on the blue guitar.

(*CP*, p. 180)

That final couplet should not be read as two consecutive propositions which separate thinking (in the mind) from saying (on the instrument). On the contrary, context, rhythm (the caesuras after the second and third "are"), repetition, rhyme, and internal rhyme all de-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

mand that "on the blue guitar" modify and locate the thinking and the saying and make of them a single activity.

This is not idealism; nor is it an identification of the self with nature; or that attempt to transform nature into something human which Stevens earlier in the poem calls "the chord that falsifies" (*CP*, p. 171). Throughout Stevens's writing appears a deep reverence for reality in its vital non-humanness and an abiding conviction that a major function of poetry must be to achieve "contact with reality as it impinges on us from outside, the sense that we can touch and feel a solid reality which does not wholly dissolve itself into the conceptions of our own minds."²⁰ That nature is neither mind nor mental the poetry finds a source not of despair but joy. The joy is perhaps best expressed in the final lines of "How to Live, What to Do," a poem Stevens said he especially liked "because it so definitely represents my way of thinking":²¹

There was neither voice, nor crested image,
No chorister, nor priest. There was
Only the great height of the rock
And the two of them standing still to rest.

There was the cold wind and the sound
It made, away from the muck of the land
That they had left, heroic sound
Joyous and jubilant and sure.

(*CP*, p. 126)

A like sense of joy in the fundamental differentness of man and nature is central to Frost's vision. He stresses this in poems such as "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things." The clearest example is probably "The Most of It," where the sudden appearance of a great buck redeems the loneliness of a man who "thought he kept the universe alone" (*PRF*, p. 338). Far from distrusting the phenomena of the world, Frost and Stevens insist that they be seen clearly and accepted as things independent of the human mind upon which man can and must rely for knowledge.

Stevens figures this process explicitly in "Landscape With Boat." The poem presents an "anti-master-man," amalgamating Plato and

²⁰ *The Necessary Angel*, p. 96. Stevens is paraphrasing H. D. Lewis's essay "On Poetic Truth." See *OP*, p. 236.

²¹ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 293.

Descartes (cf. *OP*, p. 236), for whom truth transcends or exists independently of phenomena:

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue.

(*CP*, p. 241)

Though this idealist could not avoid living in the world of sense, he refused to accept it as part of his thinking: "He received what he denied. / But as a truth to be accepted, he supposed / A truth beyond all truths. . . . He never supposed / . . . that if nothing was the truth, then all / Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth" (*CP*, p. 242). Consequently he became "like a phantom in an uncreated night . . . projected by one void into / Another" (*CP*, p. 242).

Frost's later poetry offers a parallel version of the loss of the world that results when man divorces thought from physical phenomena, particularly from the body itself. The poem is "Etherealizing":

A theory if you hold it hard enough
And long enough gets rated as a creed:
Such as that flesh is something we can slough
So that the mind can be entirely freed.
Then when the arms and legs have atrophied,
And brain is all that's left of mortal stuff,
We can lie on the beach with the seaweed
And take our daily tide baths smooth and rough.
There once we lay as blobs of jellyfish
At evolution's opposite extreme.
But now as blobs of brain we'll lie and dream,
With only one vestigial creature wish:
Oh, may the tide be soon enough at high
To keep our abstract verse from being dry.

(*PRF*, pp. 394-395)

The blob of jellyfish and the blob of brain reflect the same impotence. In the first figure man is an organism without spirit; in the second he is a disembodied mind. Frost suggests that either condition removes poetic thought from its essential center. The final "creature wish" is to be touched again and redeemed by the physical world.

"To keep our abstract verse from being dry," mind and phenomena must be accepted equally as instruments of thought and used to interpret one another.

Frost has not belabored the point in prose like Stevens, but it is often manifest in his poetry. One of the clearest examples is "West-Running Brook." The theme of the poem, baldly stated, is that love depends upon a balanced union of contraries. But the central drama of the poem presents the attempt of a young couple to better understand their relationship to one another and their uses of the brook as a figure to help them understand. The brook figures contrariness in three ways: in running west, while the other brooks run east; in the standing wave where it seems to run counter to itself; and, most importantly, in the contrary manner in which the husband and wife use it. The wife uses herself to think about the brook: "It must be the brook / Can trust itself to go by contraries / The way I can with you. . ." (*PRF*, p. 258). Conversely, the husband uses the brook to think about human life: "It is this backward motion toward the source, / Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in. . ." (*PRF*, p. 260). Their temperaments lead them to almost opposite interpretations, hers romantic, his nearly nihilistic. But as in each case the brook leads to a figuring of balanced contraries, so the activity of thinking with and about it together leads the couple to a clarification of their relationship with one another and acceptance of their own contrariness.

v

The second proposition about poetic method can be seen as the converse of the first. Because in the poetic mode the self and the world are not separable, poetic thinking requires personal commitment to the figures one creates and uses. Like Stevens's singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poet "dwells in" his songs. The poetic method of thinking is not a method of doubt and rejection, awaiting final proof, but a method of supposition and choice, the deliberate holding and the creative use of unproven beliefs. That this proposition may be the converse of the first becomes apparent in "Landscape With Boat," for the kind of thinking that dismisses the phenomenal world as suspect and unreliable for discovering truth figures in the poem as a kind of thinking that insists also on the impersonal nature of knowledge and refuses to accept the necessity

of individual commitment in establishing it. Thus Stevens says of his "anti-master-man": "He never supposed / That he might be truth, himself, or part of it. . ." (*CP*, p. 242). In the conclusion to the poem Stevens proposes poetic method as an alternative to his ascetic's search for an impersonal truth and his method of doubt and denial:

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming Emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
And say, "The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime."

(*CP*, p. 243)

As a gloss on these lines there is none better than the speech of Stevens's "figure of the youth as virile poet": "*I am myself a part of what is real and it is my own speech and the strength of it, this only, that I hear or ever shall.*"²² The young poet recognizes himself as a part of the reality of the natural world but also as part of what is "unreal," the "imagination of life" on which truth depends. The essay concludes with an address to the "mystic muse," who has been rejected as a mythical goddess but is now reacknowledged as a power of the mind:

*Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask, although I am part of what is real, hear me and recognize me as part of the unreal. I am the truth, but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours.*²³

Stevens recognized that at the root of knowledge lies a commitment to unproven figures and structures, "fictions" that depend wholly on belief in them. He began "Asides on the Oboe" with the lines:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

(*CP*, p. 250)

²² *The Necessary Angel*, p. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

To say, “final belief must be in a fiction,” is not to say, “I believe in something I know to be false,” but to say, “I recognize that what I ultimately must believe in are the figures I have made to dwell in and think with about myself and the world.” This conviction led Stevens to the idea of a “supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment.”²⁴ The idea of a supreme fiction suggests an inclusive structure of belief, such as that which Stevens attributes to Santayana, “a total edifice, / Chosen by an inquisitor of structures / For himself” (*CP*, pp. 510–511).²⁵ But the supreme fiction also includes, necessarily, the process which creates that “edifice”; “in the long run,” Stevens wrote to Henry Church, “poetry would be the supreme fiction.”²⁶

As such, the supreme fiction is “not a light apart, up-hill,” something to be attained at the end of a quest, but the activity that supports daily life, “the essential poem at the centre of things.” Cantos 4, 5, and 6 of “A Primitive like an Orb” are worth quoting in their entirety as a summary of Stevens’s poetics:

One poem proves another and the whole,
 For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:
 The lover, the believer, and the poet.
 Their words are chosen out of their desire,
 The joy of language, when it is themselves.
 With these they celebrate the central poem,
 The fulfillment of fulfillments, in opulent,
 Last terms, the largest, bulging still with more,

 Until the used-to earth and sky, and the tree
 And cloud, the used-to tree and used-to cloud,
 Lose the old uses that they made of them,
 And they: these men, and earth and sky, inform
 Each other by sharp informations, sharp
 Free knowledges, secreted until then,
 Breaches of that which held them fast. It is
 As if the central poem became the world,

 And the world the central poem, each one the mate
 Of the other, as if summer was a spouse,

²⁴ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 820.

²⁵ For a lengthy and lucid examination of structural imagery as a figure for the supreme fiction, see James M. Baird, *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore, 1968).

²⁶ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 430.

Espoused each morning, each long afternoon,
 And the mate of summer: her mirror and her look,
 Her only place and person, a self of her
 That speaks, denouncing separate selves, both one.
 The essential poem begets the others. The light
 Of it is not a light apart, up-hill.

(*CP*, p. 441)

“The central poem” refers to poetry itself, the activity of thinking and knowing in which the self and the world are employed as figures to give form and meaning to one another, the process of discovery through which man liberates himself from the bonds of customary formulations by pouring himself and his world into figurative language, language chosen with the desire and resting on the passionate commitment of “the lover, the believer, and the poet.”

Love, belief, and poetry. Frost also associates these three, and through that association he expresses the same vision of poetic activity that Stevens articulates in “A Primitive like an Orb.” Frost often used love as an analogy for poetry, as, for example, in saying that “the figure a poem makes . . . is the same as for love” (*SP*, p. 18). But love is more than an analogy for poetry; it is also Frost’s name for the positive force that impels poetry, the energy behind all true thinking. In “Accidentally on Purpose” love is called the basic instinctual force that underlies “intention, purpose, and design” in the universe:

How happily instinctive we remain,
 Our best guide upward to the light,
 Passionate preference such as love at sight.

(*PRF*, p. 425)

In “Kitty Hawk,” an ode to the power of human thought to build upon itself and thrust its way into the unknown, Frost compares this same instinctual drive to the Incarnation: “Pulpiteers will censure / Our instinctive venture / Into what they call / The material / When we took that fall / From the apple tree. / But God’s own descent / Into flesh was meant / As a demonstration / That the supreme merit / Lay in risking spirit / In substantiation” (*PRF*, pp. 434-435).

For Frost love and poetry function as twin figures of the creative activity in which man commits himself, with “passionate preference,”

to a certain tacit foreknowledge that he has and, by believing in it, brings it to fulfillment. In "Education by Poetry" he wrote that, in connection with learning about thinking, "the person who gets close enough to poetry, he is going to know more about the word *belief* than anybody else knows, even in religion nowadays" (*SP*, p. 44). Like the relationship of two people in love, the process of poetic thinking demands the act of "believing the thing into existence," and in poetry as in love one learns that the indwelling of the human spirit in its forms is essential to all creation and to all knowledge. Like Stevens, Frost came to see poems as individual embodiments of a single, central activity. In a later essay, "The Constant Symbol," he wrote: "There is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always. Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost" (*SP*, p. 24).

Like the man in "slouching pantaloons" in Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," who is "looking for what was, where it used to be" (*CP*, p. 389), those who bewail the loss of belief in the modern world have misconstrued the nature of belief in searching for some kind of objective entity apart from the self which might satisfy them. The complaint of Jesse Bel in "A Masque of Mercy" is typical. She says:

Something's the matter, everyone admits.
On the off-chance it may be lack of faith,
I have contributed the empty cellar
To Paul to see what he can do with it
To bring faith back. I'm only languidly
Inclined to hope for much. Still what we need
Is something to believe in, don't we, Paul?

(*PRF*, pp. 514-515)

For Jesse Bel "something to believe in" implies something external to herself. The belief that Frost associates with poetic method is rooted in the self; it is a tacit foreknowledge "that you don't want to tell other people about because you cannot prove that you know. You are saying nothing about it till you see" (*SP*, p. 46). This is the belief embodied in "The Strong Are Saying Nothing." The poem

figures the implicit faith present in the farmers' spring planting, an unprovable belief in their activity which the activity itself, entered into in relationship with the soil and the weather, will bring to fulfillment. In the last stanza the poem expands to figure the last of the "four beliefs" Frost enumerates in "Education by Poetry," "the relationship we enter into with God to believe the future in—to believe the hereafter in" (*SP*, p. 46):

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
There may be little or much beyond the grave,
But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

(*PRF*, p. 300)

Frost's best treatment of the role of belief and commitment in establishing truth appears in "Directive," a poem about returning to some basic source of wholeness and strength, "beyond confusion." It begins with an introspective journey through a landscape of desolation, marked by waste land imagery which makes it seem doubtful that this journey can lead in a valuable direction. Yet a guide appears, vague and phantom-like at first but increasingly more concrete and personal toward the end of the poem. By the final lines it is clear that the guide is the poet, and the source of wholeness he discloses is a fundamental power within the self. The poet is a guide to the life of the imagination, to the "broken drinking goblet like the Grail" taken from the children's "house of make-believe." The goblet is "Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it, / So can't get saved, as Saint Mark says they mustn't" (*PRF*, p. 379).²⁷ In the Gospels the "wrong ones" are the skeptics, legalistic Pharisees who, lacking faith and belief, are unable to dwell in the world of figures and consequently unable to understand the truth of the parables or the way parables convey the truth. "Plain language" might cause them to "turn and be forgiven" without having to make the genuine bestowal of themselves that salvation, and figurative understanding, demand. Like the teachings of Christ, poetic truth depends on commitment and faith.

²⁷ The reference is to Mark 4:10-25. Jesus has preached the parable of the sower and the disciples ask him why he speaks to the people in parables. He replies: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven." This was a passage that Frost often referred to in discussions of poetic method. See, for example, *Interviews with Robert Frost*, p. 162, and *Selected Prose*, p. 78.

The power Frost guides us to in "Directive" is the power of belief in ourselves and our figures, the power of poetry itself as a method of thinking and knowing.

VI

The malaise that manifests itself in the waste land vision of the modern world is closely related to the modern conception of thought and knowledge, to the modern notion of inquiry. Polanyi has written:

It has been taken for granted throughout the critical period of philosophy that the acceptance of unproven beliefs was the broad road to darkness, while truth was approached by the straight and narrow path of doubt. . . . In its stricter formulations the principle of doubt forbids us altogether to indulge in any desire to believe and demands that we should keep our minds empty, rather than allow any but irrefutable beliefs to take possession of them. . . . The method of doubt is a logical corollary of objectivism. It trusts that the uprooting of all voluntary components of belief will leave behind unassailed a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence.²⁸

In the twentieth century the "objective evidence" and the "irrefutable beliefs" it supports have revealed a naturalistic universe that is, as Joseph Wood Krutch put it, "one in which the human spirit cannot find a comfortable home,"²⁹ but which includes man as a part of it and denies the reality of the spirit it cannot satisfy. That universe is the diminished thing to which modern man must respond, and the difficulty of responding satisfactorily seems to underlie much of the metaphysical despair in Western literature at least since the beginning of the Romantic age.

Frost and Stevens experienced the terror of this vision as acutely as any modern artists, but they went beyond most modernists in their recognition that no satisfactory resolution to the dilemma could be found so long as the premises which produced the dilemma were accepted as unavoidable. In their mature work Frost and Stevens rejected the conceptual commitments on which the literature of metaphysical despair was based: the separation of the self from the world, the acceptance of doubt as a method of arriving at truth, and the definition of truth and knowledge as "objective," hence independent

²⁸ Polanyi, p. 269.

²⁹ *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession* (New York, 1956), p. xi.

of personal desire and belief. In writing poems and reflecting on their experience, they came to see that none of these assumptions accurately described the activity they were engaged in, that the assumptions were not only avoidable but manifestly false when measured against a careful consideration of the way human beings think and act. In poetry the inquiring mind does not back away from the world toward a position of detached objectivity but plunges into the world on the impulse of love and desire. Poetic truth is reached not by doubt but by commitment. Poetic knowledge is not "objective" but always figurative and personal, the result of an imaginative act that requires the participation of the knower who is himself a vital part of what is known. Finally, poetry speaks to man's image of himself. By coming close to poetry man realizes that he is neither a disembodied mind split off from the world nor a spiritless organism but a mind-body in the world shaping the world and himself with his creative power.

Frost and Stevens believed that all men were involved in at least a rudimentary kind of poetic activity, that the method of poetry was a true description of human thought not only in art but in science and in our daily lives. Stevens wrote in his "Adagia" that "the theory of poetry is the theory of life" (*OP*, p. 178), and Frost claimed that "metaphor [is] the whole of thinking" (*SP*, p. 37). On the basis of this conviction they deliberately attempted to make their poetry radically reflexive, manifesting its method in such a way as to communicate it clearly to the reader. They recognized that, in an age of despair, the poet's responsibility must be to make us aware of how we really think and live and thus restore us to the world and to ourselves.

Robert Frost:

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows"

Priscilla M. Paton

I HAVE WONDERED how Robert Frost carries off a line like "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." It is lovely and has the sound of truth, and Frost was always intrigued by "getting the sound of sense."¹ But, how does a "fact," something which actually happened or really exists, become equivalent to a dream, a fancy or image of the mind, and the sweetest dream at that? Do we usually talk of knowing a dream as we might know historical dates or the miles between one town and another? How does "labor" know anything, whether fact or dream?

Two critics of Frost, Reuben Brower and Richard Poirier, note that in poems such as "Mowing" and "After Apple-Picking" dream-like facts and tangible dreams rise out of some act of labor.² They and others also stress that the Frost of "For Once, Then, Something," "The Most of It," or "Design" can be purposely reticent or sly about truth and vision. Many poems seem to promise a vision in a special, fated moment, and offer glimpses of benign or malignant forces in nature. These intimations, however, are undercut by the poet's irony, doubts, and awareness of how his mood colors a scene, and they may be checked by a subsequent observation of other alternatives and facts. Revelation does not assume definite form as a mighty symbol, the unmistakable "embodiment" desired by the solitary figure in "The Most of It." Transcendence to another realm of truth does not occur in a bold flash. Yet the possibilities for imagina-

¹ Robert Frost, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward C. Lathem and Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972), "Getting the Sound of Sense: An Interview," p. 261. I cite this text for Frost's prose throughout, giving the page numbers within the body of the paper.

² See Reuben Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 23-27. See also Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 285-89, 292-93.

tive insight and a truer, finer bond between a man and his surroundings are not cancelled either. "Mowing," "After Apple-Picking," and "Birches," which dwell on dreams and common, earnest acts, are three poems that do result in oblique, graceful revelations of truth, knowledge, and love. They put forth, to use Frost's words, "a clarification of life . . . a momentary stay against confusion" ("The Figure a Poem Makes," p. 394). How and why does the union of fact, dream, and labor lead to such revelation?

Frost's particular thoughts on metaphor and making poetry help answer these questions about the confusion of fact and dream ending in "a clarification of life." In applying statements from Frost's essays to these three poems, I am building in part on Poirier's discussion of labor and vision in his book, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*. Poirier emphasizes the poetry's connection between imaginative vision and physical labor:

Frost's poetry of work is quite directly about the correlative work of writing a poem and of reading it. Any intense labor enacted in his poetry, like mowing or apple-picking, can penetrate to the visions, dreams, myths that are at the heart of reality. . . .³

Frost, like many poets, should be read with an eye toward the process itself of working, writing, and discovery, and toward the skill and concentration that process exacts—what Poirier calls the "work of knowing." For Poirier, the nature of this "work" distinguishes Frost from other writers:

Unlike Yeats or Stevens or Lawrence, Frost never lets his visions abstract him from a sense of persistent and demanding daily reality. He can be as great as they because in the management of certain poems . . . he invents occasions when conflicting kinds of reality are resolved, as Emerson wished they would be, in the mythic properties of language itself.⁴

I intend to explore further these "occasions" and their management, and the bond between a "demanding daily reality" and the mythical, metaphorical properties of language. In Frost's poetry, that bond appears to owe less to sophisticated metaphysics than to natural, almost inevitable, ways of thinking and acting. His poems

³ Poirier, p. 275.

⁴ Ibid.

often depend on the drift of colloquial language toward aphorism and vagueness. Daily speech and experience are loaded with allusiveness and metaphor: for example, "Good fences make good neighbors"; or, home is "Something you somehow haven't to deserve." It is no surprise, then, that in his 1930 talk "Education by Poetry," Frost stresses the importance of metaphor for any knowledge:

I have wanted in late years to go further and further in making metaphor the whole of thinking.

. . . unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.

All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it. It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don't know when it is going. You don't know how much you can get out of it and when it will cease to yield. It is a very living thing. It is as life itself.

(*"Education by Poetry,"* pp. 332, 334, 335)

This is an instance when a poet's explanation sounds as allusive and expansive as any poetry, if not more so. But the talk of riding metaphor and knowing its breaking point reveals habits of mind that pervade and shape Frost's poetry as well. It seems that one is surrounded in the daily world and in all kinds of thought by invitations to figurative values, meaning, and metaphors. The potential metaphors in a landscape, conversation, or gesture are neither solely mechanical, nor mystical, nor unbounded. Metaphor challenges one to feel at home in it without denying its unpredictable life. One can command metaphor, but one cannot completely know or control it: "It is as life itself."

Frost's metaphors often come from the work of field and orchard, and many poems, including "The Tuft of Flowers" and "Two Tramps in Mud Time," mingle dreams and practical considerations and assert the union of labor, need, and love. Of course, the focus on rural tasks sometimes reflects Frost's equivocal attempt to

become a popular poet of New England.⁵ His strongest poems do more than pronounce a work ethic, and they do not always tie vision to a specific act. A good preface to the use of work in "Mowing," "After Apple-Picking," and "Birches" is "The Wood-Pile" because that poem reveals the profound manner in which labor takes on real and figurative value. It does not present a man at work but one in the familiar poetic pose of taking a meditative walk. Still, it makes us wonder about the hold of work over us. What disturbs the speaker so is not the gloom of the swamp or a bird's "little fear" but an abandoned wood-pile. Some labor has not brought forth fruit:

The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
 And the pile somewhat sunken. . . .
 I thought that only
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
 Could so forget his handiwork on which
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay. (29-30, 34-40)

Here is no practical voice claiming work is wasted. Haunted by decay, it carries a regret akin to one over lost labor but suggests the power of hope.

The word "spent" above permits a happy transition to Frost's comment in "The Constant Symbol." His definition of a symbol—like the wood-pile—underscores the mystery of a man's behavior and the distance between the slow fire of the swamp and the warmth of a "useful fireplace":

Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost; be it in art, politics, school, church, business, love, or marriage—in a piece of work or in a career. Strongly spent is synonymous with kept. ("The Constant Symbol," p. 401)

This urgent sense of commitment, along with Frost's other meta-

⁵ See John C. Kemp, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

phors for metaphor, provides a fitting approach to the way his poems of work unfold their visions. Creating a symbol, which is an act of vision, involves a homely need and earnestness—the will to pitch into a piece of work. In “The Wood-Pile,” some such will and “original intention” may have been mysteriously and “weakly lost” or not. We do not know what quest in “Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks” made him desert the fruits of his labor or whether that turned out well or ill.

Commitments, uniting need and love in labor and riding metaphor, confuse fact and dream in “Mowing,” “After Apple-Picking,” and “Birches.” “Mowing,” earliest of the three, serves as the eloquent paradigm for all three. The mower plays lightly with “fact” and the imagination’s hearing of voices. A solitary reaper like Wordsworth’s “highland lass,” he has his song, the scythe’s whisper, which creates an ineffable impression. His activity, like hers, educes something profound from the landscape. Despite his subtle personification of “scythe,” though, he disclaims exact knowledge of what the blade sang:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak. (1-6)

Like metaphor, a whisper cannot be forced to reveal too much. Nonetheless, it conveys real sensations of woods and pasture, and those sensations lull one toward subliminal, dreamlike intimations. The casual, tentative “something” and “perhaps” suggest the “heat of the sun” and “lack of sound” hold further meaning and mystery. The scythe may whisper out of awe for some spirit and respect for its silence; then again, the scythe may whisper because that is the sound scythes make. Like the sun and heat, it is not human, will never have words, and remains what it is, although with hints of more.

The mower is more outspoken about what the whisper is not:

It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:

Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows, (7-10)

"Anything more," whether an easy reward of revelation or transcendence to a spirit world, is paradoxically less and "too weak"—recurring to "strongly spent or weakly lost." The mower avoids defining truth with metaphysical terms or restrictive details. It has "something" to do with evocative "facts," in wielding the scythe amid the sun and grasses.

While not allowing himself to be seduced by elvish fancies, this speaker, like the one in "The Wood-Pile," sees more than practicalities. Those familiar abstractions, "truth" and "love," enhance the scene's allusive and mythic qualities. Not so much some particular man as "earnest love" lays the swale in rows. That love, then, equals labor. As the scythe whispers of the sun and silence, labor and love absorb and cherish every detail of effort and landscape. Thus both know both fact and the sweetness of dream:

Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
 To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
 Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
 (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
 The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make. (9-14)

There is no still, perfect culmination: the orchises will begin to wither while the mower moves on and leaves the hay to cure.⁶ Neither metaphor nor vision is pushed too far. Drawn away from speculation about truth, we return to the enigmatic whisper of the scythe.

Though Frost veers away from golden gifts and looming visions in these poems of fact and hard work, he remains fond of what he called indulgence and extravagance. He once said poetry, with its similes and figurative values, is an extravagance, then added, "I look on the universe as a kind of an exaggeration anyway" ("On Extravagance: A Talk," p. 448). If this be the case, then many a fact, like dreams, must be extravagant. Indulgence appears in the sentiment "earnest love" equally with its presence in the fact, "pale orchises."

⁶ Brower explains that "'fact' is dreamed into something sweet by living it out . . . the fruit of the action is in the moment" (p. 85).

The labor and dream in "After Apple-Picking" also become indulgence and exaggeration. As the harvester describes his sleep coming on, he moves back and forth between the facts of the orchard—the unfilled barrel and the ladder "sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still"—and the sensations and images of a dream. Because of his day's absorption in work and his consequent weariness, he confuses tenses and his sense of time and place. The "essence" of sleep seems to become the "scent of apples." The "strangeness" of his sight, which temptingly suggests an imaginative, transforming vision, comes not only from drowsiness but the morning's "real" optical illusion:

Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take. (7-17)

This dreaming is not of "the gift of idle hours" but literally of magnified facts. The fruit of a harvester's labor has grown upon him to the point of extravagance and surfeit:

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap
 As of no worth. (18-36)

Of course a “waking dream” observes no distinct boundary between sleep and wakefulness in the speaker’s consciousness. It reveals work, those unending loads of apples, as a precious wonder including the pains and exhaustion from committed labor. Again, images hint at more. Though hints hide in the indulgence of phrases that could yield easy gold or weighty generalizations, we always return to apples. Indulgence, in the thunder of “rumbling sound” and emphatic phrases like “no matter if,” “went surely,” and “great harvest,” becomes most moving in the “earnest love” of

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all
 That struck the earth . . .

This summons up all that may be cherished and all that falls from heaven, where the ladder still points, not to the ground but to earth. Yet we still may not ride too far toward allegory. Fallen apples go not to a netherworld but the cider-press.

Like the harvest in Keats’ “To Autumn,” this “great harvest” is not part of an unchanging paradise. In it are effort, loss, and, in the “winter sleep,” reference to death and dormancy. Such allusions, though, build toward no dramatic climax. As at the end of “Mowing,” “lightness is all.”⁷ The speaker muses with a trace of irony, for the “trouble” is not unwelcome:

One can see what will trouble
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
 Were he not gone,
 The woodchuck could say whether it’s like his
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
 Or just some human sleep. (37-42)

“Just some human sleep” sounds ordinary as apples, though it may also hint at death. We could almost forget how the apple-picker’s

⁷ Brower, p. 32.

commitment, perception, and imagination have enriched the ordinary.

Although "Birches" describes a boy's game instead of a chore, it too has fact, dream, and in that intent game a commitment as deep as one of earnest love. Here Frost's comments on being at home in figurative values are most apt for his actual poetic images: knowing how to ride metaphor is analogous to knowing how to ride birches.

The facts about the ice storm in "Birches" grow the more and more figurative as the poet's imagined preference sounds real and prosaic. In the first lines, the poet associates a real scene with an image in his mind, and he deliberately distinguishes between the two. The casual assumption, "you must have seen them," makes his statements sound public and verifiable:

When I see birches bend to left and right
 Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
 I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
 But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
 As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
 After a rain.

(1-7)

What follows is by no means lifeless fact but an enchanting account. Not "just some" ordinary woods, the enameled trees look as crafted and ornamental as fine glass sculpture, and the fallen ice evokes a mythical catastrophe:

They click upon themselves
 As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
 As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
 Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
 Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
 Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
 You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

(7-13)

Again the poet knows metaphor's limits and implies that anyone knows them. The offhand "You'd think" shows how common it is to slip into expressions of fancy and fall back on shared myths about the heavens and earth.

The accurate description in the next lines also suggests possible metaphors:

They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
 And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
 So low for long, they never right themselves:
 You may see their trunks arching in the woods
 Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground . . .

(14-18)

After "withered," "bowed," and "years afterwards," I tend to picture old men bowed by life's burdens, but that is not the case. As part of our education in metaphor, we must learn that a visual image can take us in several directions. To the poet these trees are

Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
 Before them over their hands to dry in the sun.

(19-20)

The poet then circles back to his first image of the boy. That turn itself suggests something about the way one habitually thinks of truth and fact:

But I was going to say when Truth broke in
 With all her matter of fact about the ice storm . . .

(21-22)

"Truth" with a capital "T" is abstraction personified, a figurative value. She, a trusted absolute, it seems, and not the poet interrupts with these "facts"—"crystal shells" and "the inner dome of heaven." By implication, the poet prefers an untruth which does not deal in facts. His fancy, though, is down to earth. No idle, elvish tale here:

I should prefer to have some boy bend them
 As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
 Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
 Whose only play was what he found himself,
 Summer or winter, and could play alone.
 One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them,
 And not one but hung limp, not one was left
 For him to conquer. He learned all there was
 To learn about not launching out too soon

And so not carrying the tree away
 Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
 To the top branches, climbing carefully
 With the same pains you use to fill a cup
 Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
 Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
 Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.

(23-40)

Why is the game of this solitary boy so appealing and poignant? He never expresses his feelings, whether of joy, accomplishment, or adventure. His game, which leaves the birches limp, places him in no idyllic, pantheistic relation with nature, yet it redeems itself in part. The meaning of his actions is not explicit. As Frost once said, in poetry "We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections" ("Education by Poetry," p. 332). Here the hints and indirections tease us to make more of the parable. At the same time, something holds us back, an adherence to fact, perhaps, to orchises or apples or birches. The tease lies in the account of the boy's thoroughness and intentness in his sport. An air of dedication, purpose, and fulfillment hovers about "one by one," "over and over again," "not one . . . not one." The boy has power; he subdues and conquers. He understands perfectly how to maneuver the trees and fly from branches to ground. The predicates which convey this could preface some finality. "He learned all there was" and "he always kept his poise," themselves poised at the ends of lines, evoke the mastery and freedom of one who knows "all there is" about life. But the boy's wisdom, after its fling into the air, lands on something specific: "He learned all there was / To learn about not launching out too soon," "He always kept his poise / To the top branches." His knowledge is valid in that context, as truth in "Mowing" is valid in terms of the sun's heat and the silence.

The pains the boy takes resemble the effort of the mower's "earnest love" and the apple-picker's care. The description of the game also bears an affinity with Frost's of metaphor:

By riding them down over and over again
 Until he took the stiffness out of them . . .
 [U]nless you have had your proper poetical education in the
 metaphor . . . You don't know how far you may expect to ride
 it and when it may break down with you.

The swinger of birches, boy or poet, must know his own powers and know the strength of the trees and the strength of metaphor.

This parable is both history and dream:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 May not fate willfully misunderstand me
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return.

(41-53)

Unlike the boy among the birches, the poet is subdued by a “pathless wood.” The form of his dream of release corresponds to the boy’s physical action: getting away from earth to begin “over and over again.”

In the last lines, the poet clearly uses the parable for its figurative value, and another of Frost’s comments comes to mind: the aim of metaphor is “to restore you to your ideas of free will” (“Education by Poetry,” p. 333). The poet’s imagination, with metaphors which attend to longings and to real events, restores free will without distorting the truth. The trees are not bent by the boy; thinking that he changes the woods is the fiction. However, it seems someone really has climbed the trees and enjoyed a flight from sky to earth. By using metaphors which fuse fact and dream, the poet is no longer beaten back; and he recovers the freedom of the boy who knows all there is to know and who always kept his poise:

Earth's the right place for love:
 I don't know where it's likely to go better.
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
 But dipped its top and set me down again.
 That would be good both going and coming back.
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

(54-61)

In the end, dividing Frost's poetic images into fact, dream, and truth is impossible. Frost undermines such divisions in a manner both playful and serious, exploring slippery issues about the natures of perception, interpretation, reality, and truth. His poems often illustrate the mind seeking out metaphor and meaning in some rural or domestic scene, testing different possibilities. They also show with varying degrees of irony the mind, language, and familiar, perhaps inherent, myths imposing themselves on a landscape. Or maybe the landscape imposes something on the mind. . . .

Not all, however, is hopelessly relative or solipsistic in Frost's best poems. In subtle and conciliatory ones like the three discussed here, perception and interpretation, from day to day and in poetry, make our experience and in some way—and some ways are far better than others—are true. While imagination and poetry may draw one away from earth and truth, they may also bring one back, wiser for the journey. Metaphor, properly maneuvered, provides means for knowing the earth and for knowing metaphor. The more one knows metaphor's limits—as the mower learns how much to hear in the scythe's whisper, as the apple-picker sees the magnification of his dream, and as the boy tests the resilience of birches—the freer one becomes.

In "Mowing," "After Apple-Picking," and "Birches," then, Frost does not confuse fact and dream for the sake of cleverness but to cherish actual moments and disclose how one comes to knowledge. Labor and metaphor and faith in their value bring the poet into an intimate relation with the earth—a relation practical and loving, therefore true and necessary to life itself. Frost separates pieces written with "cunning and device" from the real art of "believing the thing into existence" ("Education by Poetry," pp. 339, 340). To believe a game, poem, or harvest into a real and moving existence as Frost does, one must commit oneself to hard work and earnest love, and one must see the facts and dream.

Frost's Synecdochism

George F. Bagby, Jr.

How anyone can fail to see
Where perfectly in form and tint
The metaphor, the symbol lies!
Why will I not analogize?
(I do too much in some men's eyes.) (p. 327)¹

I

THE reader of Frost can hardly help noticing a recurrent structural tendency in the nature lyrics: again and again, the poems move naturally from description of an object or scene or event to a commentary or meditation on its significance. This pattern may be perfectly obvious, as in "Design" (where it is also particularly appropriate to the subject of the poem's meditation). It may be considerably less obvious (as in "The Wood-Pile" or "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind"); or it may be submerged, as it is in "Birches," almost hidden beneath the complexities of other kinds of twistings and turnings. But the basic pattern—the movement "from sight to insight" (p. 559), as the poet himself puts it—is altogether characteristic of the way Frost's mind works. It reflects a whole way of perceiving reality: fundamental epistemological assumptions, perceptual habits, linguistic assumptions, and structural preferences. It is, moreover, a highly conscious way of perceiving and writing, a practical poetics which Frost developed largely from Emersonian suggestions.

¹ Quotations from Frost's verse are taken from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). Brief passages cited from poems which are not specified by title are followed by parenthetical page numbers referring to this edition.

Especially in the earlier years of his career, Frost occasionally describes himself as a symbolist—and invariably intends the term in an Emersonian sense. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer in 1917, for instance, he objects to the label of “Yankee realist”—in effect, local colorist—which had been applied to him by critics such as Amy Lowell. “I wish for a joke I could do [i.e., describe] myself,” he writes, “shifting the trees entirely from the Yankee realist to the Scotch symbolist.” “Scotch symbolist” is meant to suggest the habits of mind which Frost inherited from his mother, particularly his early exposure to Swedenborgian doctrines. As he notes elsewhere, “I was brought up a Swedenborgian. I am not a Swedenborgian now. But there’s a good deal of it that’s left with me. I am a mystic. I believe in symbols.”² That such symbols are to be understood in the Emersonian sense is clear in a late essay, where Frost describes his efforts during half a century to understand Emerson’s “Brahma”: those efforts, he writes, have made him “a confirmed symbolist” (*Sel. Prose*, p. 97).³

On one occasion toward the end of his life, Frost is reported by Untermeyer to have disclaimed the symbolist label—no doubt because the word is too likely to be understood in a *symboliste*, rather than Emersonian, sense. Yet even in rejecting the label in its usual twentieth-century sense, Frost implicitly invokes the Emersonian or Thoreauvian brand of symbolism out of which his poetry does rise: “I can’t hold with those who think of me as a symbolical poet, especially one who is symbolical prepense. Symbolism is all too likely to clog up and kill a poem—symbolism can be as bad as an embolism. If my poetry has to have a name, I’d prefer to call it Emblemism—it’s the visible emblem of things I’m after.”⁴

Most characteristically, however, Frost calls himself neither emblemist nor symbolist, but synecdochist. In a letter to Untermeyer written about 1915, he grants: “If I must be classified as a

² *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 63 (also printed in *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964], p. 225); Edward Connery Lathem, *Interviews with Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 49, quoted in Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915–1938* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 694, n. 23.

³ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, Collier Books (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

⁴ A conversation in autumn 1958, reported in *Letters to Untermeyer*, p. 376.

poet, I might be called a Synecdochist; for I prefer the synecdoche in poetry—that figure of speech in which we use a part for the whole.”⁵ The same term crops up in several later comments reported by Frost’s first biographer, Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant. In 1931 the poet notes: “I started calling myself a Synecdochist when others called themselves Imagists or Vorticists. Always, always a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing.” A few years earlier, he reports: “I believe in what the Greeks call synecdoche: the philosophy of the part for the whole; skirting the hem of the goddess. All that an artist needs is samples.”⁶ As the very language of these statements suggests, when Frost calls himself a synecdochist he is referring to a great deal more than simply a preferred variety of figurative speech.

Emerson normally uses the term “symbol” to describe both a poetic and an epistemological theory. Not only is verbal expression symbolic (“Words are symbols of natural facts”), but the creation itself is symbolic (“natural facts are symbols of . . . spiritual facts” [CW, I, 17]).⁷ As Charles Feidelson has noted—and here we touch on an idea which is central to the origins of Frost’s thinking about poetry and nature—“symbol” is not the only term which Emerson uses in both a stylistic and an ontological sense. “When he declares that ‘there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature’ [CW, III, 10], that ‘the entire system of things gets represented in every particle’ [CW, II, 57], he is defining synecdoche.”⁸

⁵ Quoted from the introduction to Frost’s poems in Untermeyer’s anthology, *Modern American Poetry / Modern British Poetry*, Combined Mid-Century Ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 180 of the American section. The 1915 date for the original statement is assigned by Thompson, *The Years of Triumph*, pp. 485, 693, n. 23.

⁶ Sergeant, *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 325; and “Robert Frost: A Good Greek out of New England,” *New Republic*, 30 Sept. 1925, p. 148. In the latter article, Sergeant also reports Frost as saying: “Imagery and after-imagery are about all there is to poetry. Synecdoche and synecdoche” (p. 147). All three passages from Sergeant are quoted in Thompson, p. 693, n. 23.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Emerson are taken from *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vols. I–, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971–), abbreviated *CW*.

⁸ Charles Feidelson, Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 147. The idea that nature is synecdochic occurs frequently in Emerson’s writing, e.g., in *Nature* (CW, I, 27), in “Compensation” (CW, II, 59–60), and in the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Vols. I–XIV; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–78), V, 136, 137; this source is hereafter abbreviated *JMN*.

Frost, though always less radical than Emerson in his formulations, likewise uses "symbol" and "synecdoche" in more than a linguistic sense. On the one hand, synecdoche is of course a kind of trope—"that figure of speech in which we use a part for the whole." On the other hand, when Frost describes himself as "a mystic" and a believer in symbols in a Swedenborgian context, he is surely suggesting that things themselves may be seen as symbolic or synecdochic. So with the claim that he believes in "the philosophy"—presumably a carefully chosen word—"of the part for the whole; skirting the hem of the goddess." When we look at the poems themselves, we find that they are shaped by Frost's "synecdochism" at every level, from style to structure to the very manner of perceiving reality which is incorporated in them.

II

Most of Frost's epistemological assumptions, stated and unstated, have their roots in Emerson (and many of them, through Emerson and Thoreau, in seventeenth-century English thought). Some of Frost's nature lyrics might seem curious indeed to a reader unfamiliar with the tradition of what Emerson calls "strange sympathies" between man and the external creation (*JMN*, IV, 200), or what Thoreau calls the "sympathy . . . with our race" demonstrated by "sun and wind and rain, . . . summer and winter" (*Walden*, p. 138).⁹ In "A Leaf-Treader," the poet spends an entire day manically treading fallen leaves underfoot—because he hears them "threatening" "to carry me with them to death." This reaction to autumn leaves might seem strange—unless we recognize that Frost feels what Emerson (*CW*, I, 10) calls "an occult relation" with the foliage. Thoreau asks, "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (*Walden*, p. 138). So in "A Leaf-Treader" the dark, falling leaves "spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf."

Ultimately, these sympathies are manifestations of what the seventeenth century (like Emerson, on some occasions) calls "correspondences" between man and nature, the spiritual and the

⁹ Quotations from *Walden* refer to the edition of J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).

physical.¹⁰ In "Leaves Compared with Flowers," Frost values foliage for exactly the same reason that Thoreau values the hooting of owls (*Walden*, p. 125): because "Leaves are all my darker mood." In a similar, better known case, the "desert places" in a winter landscape correspond to the poet's own spiritual wildernesses. Less darkly, "The weather's alternations, summer and winter," correspond to "love's alternations, joy and grief" (p. 317). Indeed, the meteorological is Frost's favorite metaphor for his unstated assumption of correspondences: "outer" corresponds to "inner weather"—the "Vague dream-head" of a tree, reacting to the shifting winds, mirrors the still less predictable dream activity of the human mind, inspired by the imagination which must have "put our heads together" (pp. 251-52).¹¹

Because of the assumed analogies between internal and external weather, natural phenomena for Frost, as for so many other American nature writers, are almost never purely physical or random. Because outer scenes and events "correspond to" inner, they seem almost to have been "put there" to set off sympathetic vibrations in the observer's mind and thus to serve as signs calling for interpretation. The "frozen-ground-swell" undermining a stone wall is taken to be evidence of "Something" in the natural world "that doesn't love a wall," but, implicitly preferring human fellowship to arbitrary barriers, "makes gaps even two can pass abreast." A single flower, spider, and dead moth are assumed to have been arranged in a grim tableau by another force which has "brought" the spider and "steered" the moth to the same flower even in the night—all with the apparent design of teaching the observer something about the darker side of nature. The chirping of a thrush in the woods is "Almost like a call to come in / To the dark and lament" (p. 334). A stray Dalmatian which wanders in to the poet's house is taken (humorously, it is true) to be a kind of

¹⁰ For an enlightening historical account of the doctrine of correspondences from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, see Earl R. Wasserman, "Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century," *ELH*, 20 (1953), 39-76.

¹¹ Of course, there are also moments in which correspondences are considerably less neatly arranged in Frost's practice than they are in Emerson's theory. See, for instance, R. A. Yoder's comments in *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), pp. 185-86.

messenger from the dog star, "A symbol," "An intimation" of "A meaning I was supposed to seek" (p. 421).

As these latter terms begin to suggest, though natural signs or emblems are generally less explicit for Frost than they are for Emerson or Thoreau, they may, at least on occasion, approach the fully human clarity of words. In a light mood, when a snowstorm closes a country road so that the poet cannot "come as a foot printer," he is confident that some mouse or fox "Shall print there as my proxy" (p. 416). "A Patch of Old Snow," seen from the right perspective, is "a blow-away paper," "speckled with grime as if / Small print overspread it." In a more serious play on "print," Frost suggests that, "On snow and sand and turf," "Love has left a printed trace" (p. 120)—not just a footprint, but a kind of message. The flower, spider, and moth described in "Design" are "Assorted characters of death and blight" in two senses of "characters": both *dramatis personae* and letters in a message which the observer seeks to decipher. Or again, in a word-play which echoes Whitman, "leaves" are both foliage and pages in a vegetable text: fossilized remains, which Frost calls "leaves of stone," compose a kind of natural encyclopedia, "The picture book of the trilobite" (p. 364).

Underlying all of these local metaphors of natural phenomena as "characters" "printed" on "leaves" is Frost's own version of the seventeenth-century metaphor of the book of nature. This larger metaphor becomes explicit in a remarkable and important sonnet, "Time Out." There a Thoreauvian wanderer pauses and realizes:

The mountain he was climbing had the slant
As of a book held up before his eyes
(And was a text albeit done in plant).
Dwarf cornel, goldthread, and *Maianthemum*,
He followingly fingered as he read . . .

Given the fact that this is not an early poem,¹² the archaism of the crucial parenthetical line—" (And was a text albeit done in plant)"—amounts almost to a bow to the venerable tradition which descends from the seventeenth century. But the last two lines

¹² Lawrence Thompson and R. H. Winnick, in *Robert Frost: The Later Years 1938-1963* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 390, n. 5, suggest that "Time Out" was written in 1939.

quoted show how that tradition has characteristically been filtered through Frost's nineteenth-century American forebears: both the naturalist's attention to the species of plant involved and the affectionate "fingering" of those plants represent Frost at his most Thoreauvian.

III

In the lyrics themselves, Frost's synecdochism has many consequences. Local stylistic manifestations frequently involve a kind of sophisticated punning in which a term refers simultaneously to a literal object and to a broader, figurative reality—the sort of thing we have already seen in Frost's use of "character" or "print." A model example occurs in "After Apple-Picking," where "Essence of winter sleep is on the night, / The scent of apples." "Essence," clearly, is not only the literal perfume, "The scent of apples"; for Frost, that scent physically embodies, or synecdochically represents, the essential qualities of winter sleep, of the post-harvest state of mind with which the poem is concerned. The same kind of synecdochic pun is central to "Fragmentary Blue." In the first stanza of the poem, "heaven" is used literally, meaning simply "sky": "heaven presents in sheets the solid hue" of blue. But in the second stanza (indeed in the very next line) the word takes on an expanded, figurative meaning as Frost answers his question why men should cherish that particular color: "Since earth is earth, perhaps, not heaven (as yet)." The play on "heaven" in the literal sense and "heaven" in the figurative sense reflects precisely what the poem is about: the relationship between earthly, "fragmentary blue" and the larger realm of spiritual fulfillment which that blue synecdochically emblems. Comparable double meanings occur in the titles of two of Frost's volumes. A "mountain interval" is both a literal "intervale" (a tract of low, open land between mountains) and a momentary pause between imaginative climbings. (In fact, when urged by a well-meaning friend to spell the word "intervale," Frost insisted on "interval" precisely because of "its double meaning.") And "a further range" is not just a more distant group of mountains but also the further range of experience which they image out.¹³

¹³ The argument about the accuracy of "interval," and Frost's reaction to it, are reported by Thompson in *The Years of Triumph*, p. 539, n. 28. The dedication of *A Further Range*

Plays like these on "essence," "heaven," "interval," and "range" are not superficial linguistic games; they all suggest that the physical part manifests a more than physical whole. Such synecdochism may be most obvious when it shows itself in verbal plays, but it pervades Frost's lyrics even when it does not rise to the surface of the language. The very materials of the poetry—the natural objects, events, and situations, and the way they are managed—are synecdochic.¹⁴ Undoubtedly this is above all what Frost has in mind when he describes himself as a synecdochist: "All that an artist needs is samples"; "Always, always a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing." We see the phenomenon clearly in a well-known poem like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poem, with its familiar lines, has been the object of a remarkable amount of critical interpretation, reader after reader seeking to define the numerous levels of meanings embedded in the poem's apparent simplicity. The poem in its entirety contains no surface difficulties, no obscurities of language or syntax, no esoteric allusions, virtually no figurative language, no "symbolism prepense." Yet every reader senses meaning beyond the obvious and literal—precisely because the very *things* of the poem are synecdochic. Pausing to rest on a dark, cold evening; contemplating a realm which is both beautiful and dark, attractive and eerie; having promises to keep; being in the midst of a journey at the end of which lies sleep—all of these situations and activities are symbolic in the Emersonian sense—synecdochic, to use Frost's preferred term. Every one of them is a concrete, partial embodiment of a whole realm of experience; that is why the poem invites us to read it not only as a simple narrative but also as a meditation on such matters as duty, will, and temptation.

stresses the dual meaning: "To E. F. for what it may mean to her that beyond the White Mountains were the Green; beyond both were the Rockies, the Sierras, and, in thought, the Andes and the Himalayas—range beyond range even into the realm of government and religion."

¹⁴ Many critics have touched on this trait. One commentator, for instance, writing of "Mowing," has noted "the scene's allusive and mythic qualities" (Priscilla M. Paton, "Robert Frost: 'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,'" *American Literature*, 53[1981], 48). More generally, Robert Penn Warren has discussed Frost's use of "the suggestive-in-the-commonplace" and his technique of "developing images gradually from the literal descriptive level of reference to the symbolic level of reference" ("The Themes

The method of "Stopping by Woods" is typical of a number of Frost's more reticent lyrics, in which the concrete vehicle of the synecdoche is stated, the abstract tenor only hinted at. The technique of "After Apple-Picking" is similar: the poem talks explicitly about a specific harvest, implicitly about aspiration, harvest, and satiety in a much broader sense. Likewise in "Peril of Hope": the written poem is a very spare description of one stage in the budding and blossoming of fruit trees; the poem between the lines, to which the title directs our attention, is about the dangers which may beset fruition in a more general sense.

My chief interest, however, lies neither in the local stylistic manifestations of Frost's synecdochism nor in the synecdochism of his subject matter, but in the synecdochism of his poetic structures. Frost's well-known dictum on "The Figure a Poem Makes" tells us: "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood" (*Sel. Prose*, p. 18). Frost is talking here chiefly about the process of composing, how a poem gets written; but the pronouncement describes equally well the imaginative structure of a typical Frost lyric.

If (to put the matter in seventeenth-century terms) a natural object or scene is a kind of text, then the observer's response to that scene is likely, in the manner of a sermon, to fall into two parts (the two stages which I noted at the beginning of this essay):

of Robert Frost," *Selected Essays* [New York: Random House, 1958], pp. 129–30, 135). The trait is related to a central part of John F. Lynen's conception of pastoral in Frost: "Frost, like the writers of old pastoral, draws upon our feeling that the rural world is representative of human life in general. By working from this nodal idea he is able to develop in his poems a very broad range of reference without ever seeming to depart from particular matters of fact. . . . he gives us only the minute particulars of his own immediate experience; yet . . . the things described seem everywhere to point beyond the rural world" (*The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960], p. 19). Finally, William H. Pritchard has noted "the movement from the level of sense to that of spirit," and suggested that "from the very beginning it lay at the heart of Frost's enterprise as a poet" (*Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984], p. 20).

reading of the text and commentary on its lesson. This epistemological movement may also be stated in expressive terms as the movement from description of the natural vehicle to commentary on its implications (the tenor); or, in more specifically Frostian terms, from description of the natural part to commentary on the more than natural whole. Thus, "the figure"—a word that may mean both underlying metaphor or synecdoche and underlying structure—which "a poem makes" begins in the "delight" of observing a particular object or scene or action; it ends in the "wisdom" of grasping the larger human insight of which the observed phenomenon is the partial embodiment. It "assumes direction from the first line laid down" because the observed vehicle of any natural synecdoche inherently hints at the general tenor; that is why its "outcome," the lesson read in the natural emblem, "though unforeseen was predestined from the first image." And because the observed fact with which the poem begins reflects in miniature "the whole sense of nature," as Emerson puts it, the unfolding of the larger significance of that fact will almost inevitably offer a "clarification," a "denouement," a "momentary stay against confusion." (This fact in turn helps to explain why many of Frost's lyrics close, as many of Emerson's do also, epigrammatically or aphoristically. As Frost adds, just after the passage cited above: the poem "finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad.")

In short, the Emersonian conception of symbolism—what Frost prefers to call emblemism or synecdochism—provides both an epistemological rationale for the process of reading the "text albeit done in plant" and a formal means of dramatizing that process. The structures of most of Frost's nature lyrics are related in one way or another to the fundamental synecdochic design of what might be called the emblem poem:¹⁵ they begin with the observation of a specific natural fact or emblem and lead through one process or

¹⁵ What I call the emblem poem is a close cousin of what M. H. Abrams has called the "greater Romantic lyric," with its "descriptive-meditative" pattern. See "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederic A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 527–60; recently reprinted in Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: Norton, 1984), pp. 76–108.

another to a recognition of the larger imaginative reality implicit in it. The two underlying parts of such an emblem poem, description and commentary, or vehicle and tenor, reflect what Emerson calls the "natural fact" and its corresponding "spiritual fact" (*CW*, I, 18). The movement from one to the other not only reflects but, in many cases, acts out the process of "reading" the natural emblem.

Throughout his nature lyrics, Frost explores an enormous number of variations on this basic structural outline. The natural phenomenon or vehicle in which the poem originates may be generalized, habitual, or typical (as in "Nothing Gold Can Stay"); or it may be a specific, particularized object or scene or event, as in "Design." The movement from natural text to its lesson may be direct, as it is in both of these poems; may follow a more circuitous process of meditation, as the poet explicitly speculates on the meaning, for instance, of "Birches"; or, while the poem's fiction again acts out the movement from sight to insight, may involve, not an internal meditation on the natural emblem, but a direct discovery or revelation of its meaning, as for instance in "The Tuft of Flowers." Whatever the variations—and they are of great interest in themselves—the basic synecdochic structure remains a formal constant in most of Frost's nature lyrics.

IV

Emerson provides Frost with the basic epistemological and linguistic rationale for writing emblem poems but not with many practical models. Ultimately because of his philosophical idealism, Emerson in his own poems tends to use natural objects more nearly allegorically than emblematically; indeed, I find in all his poems only three which might meaningfully be called emblem poems: "The Humble-Bee," "The Rhodora," and "The Titmouse." (Significantly, two of these three poems find echoes in Frost's own verse—"The Rhodora" in "A Young Birch," "The Titmouse" in "Dust of Snow" and numerous other winter lyrics.)

A more useful structural model for Frost is Bryant. With his substantial number of genuine emblem poems—"The Yellow Violet," "The Rivulet," "March," "To a Waterfowl," "Sonnet—October," "To the Fringed Gentian," and "Hymn to the North Star," to name only a few of the clearest cases—Bryant, despite the

considerable differences in many of their philosophical attitudes, helps to shape a remarkable number of Frost's lyrics.

Yet, as Frost himself is aware, the specific images and sensuous texture of his emblem poems (as of many of his ideas about how best to prepare for natural revelation) more frequently echo Thoreau than either Emerson or Bryant. (Frost writes of *Walden* that it "surpasses everything we have had in America," and acknowledges that parts of it "must have had a good deal to do with the making of me" [*Sel. Letters*, pp. 278, 182].) The reasons for this influence are not only temperamental but structural: again and again in *Walden*, as in Thoreau's other writings, we encounter prose versions of Frost's preferred synecdochic structure—what might be called "emblem passages," in which Thoreau observes seemingly trivial objects or events, ponders their significance, and draws anything but trivial lessons from them. This is true, for instance, in the opening chapter of *Walden*, in Thoreau's spring-time description of a striped snake which is able to survive for some time submerged beneath the water of a pond—"perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition: but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life" (p. 41). This is not the most predictable lesson which might be drawn from a snake under water. Still more importantly, in the last and greatest emblem passage in *Walden*, Thoreau chooses what would seem to be a particularly unpromising emblem: "a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years." Considering that emblem with his naturalist's concern for details—the dating of the egg deposit by counting annual rings in the wood, the possible causes of the egg's hatching after many years—Thoreau concludes triumphantly by reading in that homely event what is for him the paramount lesson of human experience: "faith in a resurrection and immortality" of the human soul (p. 333).

As surely as Emerson's theories of symbolism, such passages in *Walden* lie behind a poem like "Nothing Gold Can Stay," which might well serve as the structural prototype of Frost's nature lyrics:

Nature's first green is gold,
 Her hardest hue to hold.
 Her early leaf's a flower;
 But only so an hour.
 Then leaf subsides to leaf.
 So Eden sank to grief,
 So dawn goes down to day.
 Nothing gold can stay.

The basic structure here, though extraordinarily compressed,¹⁶ is typically syncdochic. In the first five lines Frost describes the concrete vehicle: the delicate, yellow, flower-like beginning of a bud, followed by its "subsiding" from that brilliant, unlimited potential to the comparative green dullness, and the inevitable limitations, of the actual leaf. These lines begin the poem with some of the "delight" which comes from a Thoreauvian familiarity with the minutiae of natural process; but—were we dealing with anyone except an American nature writer—they would scarcely prepare us for the next line. Suddenly, in a startling expansion from physical part to more than physical whole—the syncdochic analogy made explicit in the "So"—Frost moves from a detail of vegetable growth to the history of human failure and suffering. We need to remind ourselves how remarkable it is to see so slight a vehicle expanded into such a weighty tenor. And yet such an expansion is, as we have just seen, not without precedent in American nature writing: Thoreau provides a clear structural and epistemological model when he reads, in the story of the "beautiful bug" in the apple-wood table, proof of the immortality of the soul. And Emerson, in a statement that serves very well to gloss "Nothing Gold Can Stay," speaks of "the catholic character which makes every leaf an exponent of the world" (*CW*, I, 125). In short, the seemingly incongruous terms of Frost's analogy have their own kind of logic; the trope reflects Frost's characteristic way of perceiving reality, an angle of vision which is rooted in a tradition of American nature writing.

¹⁶ From *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, (c) by Henry Holt & Company. Copyright 1951 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt & Company, Publishers. For an interesting account of the manner in which Frost revised the poem to achieve greater compression, see Thompson, *The Years of Triumph*, p. 565, n. 14.

The seventh line of Frost's poem avoids anticlimax for two reasons: because it adroitly contracts the scope of the analogy from cosmogony back to the realm of Thoreauvian natural fact (a fact which, like that in the first five lines, is also implicitly synecdochic); and because the implied idea is surprising. Here, as in "Spring Pools" and "The Oven Bird," Frost suggests an almost Blakean view of natural process or experience: that it traces an essentially and consistently downward curve from its beginning. Finally, in the closing line, Frost recapitulates his postlapsarian point: "Nothing gold can stay." Again, as he does with "heaven" in "Fragmentary Blue," Frost has used a key word synecdochically. In the first line, "gold" signifies chiefly a color; by the last line, it connotes not merely yellowness but wealth or perfection in numerous senses.

The expansive potential of a poem like "Nothing Gold Can Stay"—of the synecdochic method itself—helps to explain why Frost, unlike many of his modern contemporaries, is essentially content to write a large number of short lyrics, rather than aspire to the great long poem of which *Paterson* is an exemplum. One might hypothesize a priori that Frost's production of numerous short poems suggests an atomistic view of reality. But Frost does not, in fact, accept such a view; even as brief a lyric as "Nothing Gold Can Stay" projects a fairly comprehensive vision of experience. It is rather his synecdochic view of reality, and his synecdochic structural tendencies, which make Frost attempt to capture part of an overarching truth in each of a large series of short poems. If, as Emerson assures us, "Every moment instructs, and every object; for wisdom is infused into every form" (*CW*, III, 113–14), then even the most "trivial" natural phenomenon, properly perceived, can serve as the springboard for a significant poem. On at least one occasion, in fact, Emerson comes close to advancing an explicit rationale for the poetic practice of relying on synecdochic miniatures as a valid means of expressing larger truths: always, he says, "does the World reproduce itself in miniature in every event that transpires, so that all the laws of nature may be read in the smallest fact. So that the truth speaker may dismiss all solicitude as to the proportion & congruency of his thoughts, so long as he is a faithful reporter of particular impressions" (*JMN*, VI, 302–03; cf. *CW*, II, 201). In other (Frostian) words, "All that an artist needs is samples."

Comparing Conceptions: Frost and Eddington, Heisenberg, and Bohr

Guy Rotella

IT sometimes seems as though Lawrence Thompson misread Flaubert's maxim about writing the biography of a friend and took revenge on Frost rather than for him. Perhaps by now the excesses of Thompson's indispensable "life" have been sufficiently challenged. The clamor of demur culminating in William Pritchard's sane and illuminating *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* has made its point. However, most of the force of that clamor has been spent on issues of personality, character, and behavior, that is, on Thompson's exaggerated, although necessary, correction to the public image of Frost as good gray poet. It has been less noticed that Thompson's often enlightening treatment of Frost's intellectual interests can also slip toward distortion. One example of this is his skewed presentation of Frost's attitude toward science. It is that attitude I want to consider, particularly as it is revealed in Frost's references to the new physics of the 'teens and 'twenties in his major essay, "Education by Poetry."

The oversimplifications brought on by Thompson's effort to render Frost a more orthodox believer than he was extend to his treatment of Frost's attitude toward science, which is usually reduced to the formula "Science vs Religion." Thompson's judgment throughout the biography is that Frost saw science as a threat to traditional belief (as to poetry) and that he resisted, resented, and mocked it for that reason.¹ Anachronism aside, Frost might almost have had Thompson in mind when he said, "People misunderstand me sometimes; they think I'm antiscientist."² Of

¹ For examples, see *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 729 and 658-60, n. 24.

² Reginald Cook, *Robert Frost: A Living Voice* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1974), p. 178.

course, Frost could share his age's resentment of the usurpation, by science, of efficacy, authority, and truth from religion and poetry, as he could share its fears of technological advances and of the deterministic "universe of force" that much of modern science seemed to reveal. Those attitudes sometimes caused Frost to attack science. Typically, though, his attacks are not mounted against science in general but against excessive claims for certitude made in its name: "Only in a certain type of small scientific mind can there be found cocksureness, a conviction that a solution to the riddle of the universe is just around the corner."³

In fact, Frost's attitude toward science partakes of his usual tendency, following William James, to think of opposites—science and religion, for example, or science and poetry—not as in conflict, but as paradoxically compatible (although mutually exclusive) parts of wholes. Even at his most epigrammatic, Frost's habit of mind is to reopen questions that have apparently been closed. His fondness for "seeing our theories knocked into cocked hats"⁴ is characteristic, whether he is ruffling scientific "cocksureness" or attacking the netlessness of free verse. The other side of this relished contentiousness is his pleasure in having "ideas that are neither pro nor con." As he wrote to Sidney Cox, "Get up there high enough and the differences that make controversy become only the two legs of a body the weight of which is on one in one period, on the other in the next."⁵

Thompson's insistence that Frost's stance toward science is embattled (he calls it "private warfare") is a dangerously direct route to a poet who posted warnings about his approaches: "A poem would be no good that hadn't doors. I wouldn't leave them open though."⁶ One entrance to Frost's thought and to his poems is through the references to science in "Education by Poetry." They indicate that in Eddington, Heisenberg, and Bohr, Frost

³ *Interviews with Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 64.

⁴ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 47.

⁵ Thompson, p. 290.

⁶ Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Early Years 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 397.

found the kind of large, “uncertain” scientific minds that gave him good reason for saying: “Poets and scientists have in common the biggest thing of all—their metaphors.”⁷

Interpretations aside, Thompson’s biography makes clear that Frost’s interest in science was deep and abiding. He was raised in his mother’s Swedenborgian faith, with its confidence in the ultimate reconciliation of science with religion. He was early and lastingly impressed by Richard Proctor’s assertion in *Our Place Among Infinities* that science and religion can coexist. His thorough knowledge of botany and astronomy is well documented. So, too, are his extensive responses to the theory of evolution. Moreover, it is often remarked that Frost’s later poems make knowledgeable use of such explicitly scientific materials as “Millikan motes,” the Doppler effect, atomic decay, and relativity theory.⁸ However, the importance of certain developments in science to the ideas in “Education by Poetry” and to Frost’s work in general has not been noticed. In fact, Thompson describes Frost’s treatment of science in the essay and elsewhere as “mocking.”⁹ It is hardly that.

Along with the early letters to John Bartlett on “sentence sounds” and the “sound of sense,” “Education by Poetry” (1930) is Frost’s major contribution to modern poetics. Written to be spoken, it moves with the associative ramble of good talk, yet it has a powerful focus. The subject under the essay’s lens is the place of poetry in education and in life. In the large sense, then, “Education by Poetry” is Frost’s response to Plato’s “conversational” insistence in *The Republic* that poetry be excluded from the ideal state, particularly from the central place it held in the educational methods of his own actual state. Plato’s reasons are epistemological ones. Rejecting the skeptical relativism of the Athenian Sophists,

⁷ Louis Mertins, *Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 368.

⁸ For general studies of Frost and science, see Darrel Abel, “The Instinct of a Bard: Robert Frost on Science, Logic, and Poetic Truth,” *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, 9 (1980), 59–75; John T. Hiers, “Robert Frost’s Quarrel with Science and Technology,” *Georgia Review*, 25 (1971), 182–205; Kathryn Gibbs Harris, “Robert Frost’s Early Education in Science,” *South Carolina Review*, 7 (1974), 13–33; and Kathryn Gibbs Harris, “Robert Frost and Science: The Shaping Metaphor of Motion in the Poems,” Diss. Michigan State 1976.

⁹ *The Years of Triumph*, p. 658, n. 24.

he seeks to know "a reality that never changes but is absolute, perfect, and fixed."¹⁰ His means to this ideal is reason, which—by correcting illusion and controlling emotion—can lead to certitude. Poetry is an obstacle to this search because poetry's imitations are removed from the real and, doubly so, from the ideal, and because poetry "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up."¹¹ For Frost, reason is not sufficient to achieving knowledge of whatever absolutes there may be. No more is imagination. Certitude, although it is much to be desired and sought after, is not an attainable goal. Therefore, Frost does not hope for Plato's reasoned resolution of multiplicity in the singular ideal. Instead, he seeks a largeness of self and language capacious enough not to resolve but to contain multiplicity. Where for Plato poetry obstructs knowledge and, therefore, certitude, for Frost poetry is precisely the means to knowledge, and to knowledge which, however real and valuable, remains uncertain in ultimate terms. From this, it follows that Frost's emphasis is not on Platonic "being" but on Aristotelian "becoming." Poetry is not an obstacle but an essential means in the continuous psychagogic attempt at realizing forms, at moving toward "harmonia." In this, poetry finds and justifies its central role in education and in life. It plays that role by means of the epistemological power of metaphor, which, in fact, Frost equates with poetry: "There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor."¹² For Plato, metaphor prevents knowing; it is the attractive but dangerous and ideally to be excluded guarantor of illusion and passion. For Aristotle, metaphor is "the mark of genius,—for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances."¹³ For Frost, metaphor enables knowing, and in a way that involves knowledge less near to Plato's ideal of certitude than it is to "multiplicity of consciousness," to use Dr. Johnson's Aristotelian phrase.

Aside from the literary criticism in the poems themselves, "Education by Poetry" is Frost's fullest exposition of his ideas

¹⁰ Walter Jackson Bate, "Plato," in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, Enlarged Ed., ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 39.

¹¹ Plato, in Bate, p. 48.

¹² "The Constant Symbol," in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 24.

¹³ *Poetics*, XXII, in Bate, p. 34.

about metaphor. The essay begins in outer humor, cataloguing ways in which poetry has its salvation in being mistreated, misused, or missed by the schools. Soon, though, inner seriousness emerges, and Frost is playing for heavy stakes. He says that the essence of thinking—and, thus, of education—is metaphor. The best education in metaphor is education by poetry, “the reading of it, not as linguistics, not as history, not as anything but poetry.”¹⁴ Thus, the excluded or peripheral is returned to its central place. As noted, this claim for poetry rests on Frost’s “theory” of metaphor. He says, “I have wanted in late years to go further and further in making metaphor the whole of thinking,” and thinking “is just putting this and that together.” All thinking, then, is analogical, having an eye for resemblances. We can only think *well*, when we know the possibilities *and* the limits of our analogies. Metaphor builds up but also collapses in ruins. “It is touch and go with the metaphor, and until you have lived with it long enough you don’t know when it is going.” “All metaphor breaks down somewhere.”

How, then, are we to live with the metaphor “long enough” to know “when it is going”? Frost replies: “I do not think anybody ever knows the discreet use of metaphor, his own and other people’s . . . unless he has been properly educated in poetry.” It bears repeating: “Unless you have had the proper poetical education . . . you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.”

These ideas about analogy go far toward implying a radical subjectivity that would make human knowing a matter of imposition rather than discovery. In fact, the process of imposing metaphorical shape in such a way as also to include the counters that cause the shape to shatter is a common strategy in Frost’s poems.¹⁵ (In the essay, as in the poems, Frost ignores or sharply reduces the usual distinction between simile and metaphor—in which the former is seen as emphasizing difference as well as similarity; the latter, as asserting identity. He stresses the degrees of similitude and difference in both.)

¹⁴ “Education by Poetry,” in *Selected Prose*, p. 43. All further quotations from the essay are from pp. 36–41 of this edition.

¹⁵ See my “Metaphor in Frost’s ‘The Oven Bird,’” in *Robert Frost: The Man and the Poet*, ed. Earl J. Wilcox (Rock Hill, S. C.: Winthrop College, 1981), pp. 19–30.

Frost was large enough to contain opposites, even multitudes, and he responds in a variety of ways to the subjectivity implied by his sense of knowledge as construction or imposition. He sometimes takes pleasure in the relativity of making, finding in it liberation from the oppression of received ideas, including his own: "All metaphor breaks down somewhere. That is the beauty of it." However, Frost takes other views as well. His need for certainty was strong, as his later tendency to pontificate too clearly shows (although, at best, there is bridge building in it). More important, Frost believed strongly in the (William) Jamesian value of commitment to "definiteness of position" even where one could not be sure. Furthermore, he sometimes implies that there is more to knowing than just thinking. Typically, though, such claims are well hedged.¹⁶ Well hedged, too, are Frost's occasional suggestions that the limitations of analogical knowing are the natural and proper reflection of our being the finite creatures of an infinite and providential Creator. This is the orthodox Christian view of the matter. Frost also sometimes takes the more classical, tragic one: "Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed." Incarnations nearly but not quite achieved: even when discussing analogy, Frost built while aware that his structures would collapse.

In "Education by Poetry," Frost embeds his assertions about thinking as metaphor in a number of concrete examples, several of them scientific. One describes an ancient analogy firm enough to be the very root of science: "best and most fruitful was Pythagoras' comparison of the universe with number. . . . The metaphor has held and held, breaking down only when it came to the spiritual and psychological or the out of the way places of the physical." That last phrase implies that the world of particle physics is the place where the classical models (or metaphors) of science break down. It introduces a series of examples that indicate Frost's response to the new science of his day. Two of those examples are

¹⁶ For instance, "I'll bet I could tell of spiritual realizations that for the moment at least would overawe the contentious" (my italics). *The Years of Triumph*, p. 290.

of particular interest. One involves the implications of particle physics for the old debate between determinism and freedom of the will; the other, the uncertainty or indeterminacy principle.

Frost asserts that metaphor is as central to science as it is to every human endeavor to find or posit meaning, then introduces illustrations for his claim. For instance, after expressing his pleasure in the "something like" of Einstein's curved space, he has this to say:

Another amusing one is from—what is the book?—I can't say it now; but here is the metaphor. . . . You know that you can't tell by name what persons in a certain class will be dead ten years after graduation, but you can tell actuarially how many will be dead. Now, just so this scientist says of the particles of matter flying at a screen, striking a screen; you can't tell what individual particles will come, but you can say in general that a certain number will strike in a given time. It shows, you see, that the individual particle can come freely.

I suppose there is some mockery here. The word "amusing" may condescend (although, to exaggerate the other way, the muse is in it). However, when Frost mocks in earnest, as in his treatment of the metaphor of evolution, the mockery aims not at the admittedly "very brilliant" scientific comparison of the universe to a growing thing, but at those who—unsafe in the metaphor, scientific or poetic—extend the comparison beyond its breaking point, talking about the evolution of elevators, or of candy. Such extrapolations are false because their makers don't know, in Frost's lively pun, when their metaphor "is going."

As to the metaphor at hand, Frost is pleased with it, and for good reason. He made a lifelong search for credible ways to resist the credible determinisms of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, and of their manifestations, as he thought, in such institutions as those of Roosevelt's New Deal. That search is obliquely reflected in his remark in a letter to Louis Untermeyer: "What I like about Bergson and Fabre is that they have bothered our evolutionism so much with the cases of instinct they have brought up."¹⁷ This sounds anti-scientific, but its ground is empiricism not faith. Furthermore, Frost is not reductive. It is "our" evolutionism that's "bothered"; to bother is not to overthrow. In "The White-Tailed

¹⁷ *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, p. 47.

Hornet," a poem sent up by Fabre's kind of bothering, Frost suggests his view: "Won't almost any theory bear revision?" Frost liked to revise, keeping his metaphors in sight, in play, where they could do "our thinking for us." He kept on the roster anyone who helped protect the baselines.

The scientific developments Frost discusses in his passage about particle physics were relatively recent in 1930. This raises the issue of his source. Frost suggests one but is typically coy: "what is the book?—I can't say it now." Actual lapses of memory and defensive strategies aside, the evidence is strong—circumstantial, but with the trout in the milk—that Frost's unsayable book is A. S. Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928). Frost's copy is in his personal library, now housed at New York University.¹⁸

There is much in Eddington to have attracted Frost. In him, as in Fabre, Proctor, and others, Frost found a respectable scientist who was willing to consider not only the limitations of his discipline, but also the possibility of its companionship with poetry, philosophy, and religion in the search for knowledge and meaning. Here, too, was a scientist who could write, who quoted poetry as well as formulas, and who entertained the idea that all knowledge, including the scientific, is a matter of reference frames. An example of Eddington at work will make the point. What follows is typical of the book, and likely to have pleased Frost, who admired science most for being an example of thinking, of "the plunge of the mind, the spirit, into the material universe."¹⁹ Eddington's subject is the concept of entropy. He concludes his treatment of it by discussing its "reverse" implication that organization increases toward completion or perfection as we move *back* in time toward beginnings. That implication, he notes, "has been quoted as scientific proof of the intervention of the Creator at a time not infinitely remote from today." Then, just when physics seems strong in the service of faith, Eddington reconsiders, rejecting as scientifically and theologically "naïve" the doctrine that "God wound up the material universe and has left it to chance ever since." He puts it this way: "This should be

¹⁸ For their assistance, I am grateful to John Frost, compiler of the Robert Frost Library checklist, and to Frank Walker, Fales Librarian at New York University.

¹⁹ Lathem, p. 209.

regarded as the working-hypothesis of thermodynamics rather than its declaration of faith. It is one of those conclusions from which we can see no logical escape—only it suffers from the drawback that it is incredible. As a scientist I simply do not believe that the present order of things started off with a bang; unscientifically I feel equally unwilling to accept the implied discontinuity in the divine nature. But I can make no suggestion to evade the deadlock.”²⁰

This shows just the sort of two-legged thinking “up there” “beyond conflict” that Frost told Sidney Cox he looked for.²¹ Similar passages abound. Here is the end of one that begins with a favorite Frost subject, constellations, then moves on to consider the relation of science and art:

What I would say is this: There is a side of our personality which impels us to dwell on beauty and other aesthetic significances in Nature, and in the work of man, so that our environment means to us much that is not warranted by anything found in the scientific inventory of its structure. An overwhelming feeling tells us that this is right and indispensable to the purpose of our existence. But is it rational? How can reason regard it otherwise than as a perverse misrepresentation of what is after all only a collection of atoms. . . ? If the physicist as advocate for reason takes this line, just whisper to him the word Entropy. (P. 107)

This is the quality Frost admired in Proctor and others, the ability to go by contraries, to keep a hold on opposites without easy reconciliation or mere contention. (The similarity to Proctor was not lost on the Frost household. In a 1935 letter, Mrs. Frost refers to Proctor as “Something like . . . Eddington of today.”²²) Frost would also have admired the racy mixture of gravity and humor in Eddington’s lecture style, and his habitual and “inclusive” use of metaphor: “It makes all the difference in the world whether the paper is poised as it were on a swarm of flies and sustained in shuttlecock fashion by a series of tiny blows from the swarm underneath, or whether it is supported because there is substance below it . . . ; all the difference in conception, at least, but no difference to my practical task of writing on the paper” (p. xii).

²⁰ *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 84–85. All further quotations of Eddington are from this edition. Page numbers are given in the text.

²¹ *The Years of Triumph*, pp. 290–91.

²² Thompson, *The Early Years*, p. 501, n. 8.

There is, though, stronger evidence than this that Eddington is Frost's source. Recalling Frost's discussion of the freedom of the individual particle, consider this discussion of quantum physics and causation from *The Nature of the Physical World*:

The classical laws hold good in the limit when exceedingly large quantum numbers are involved. The system comprising the sun, earth and moon has exceedingly high state-number; and the predictability of its configurations is not characteristic of natural phenomena in general but of those involving great numbers of atoms of action—such that we are concerned not with individual but with average behaviour.

Human life is proverbially uncertain; few things are more certain than the solvency of a life-insurance company. The average law is so trustworthy that it may be considered predestined that half the children now born will survive the age of x years. But that does not tell us whether the span of life of young A. McB. is already written in the book of fate, or whether there is still time to alter it by teaching him not to run in front of motorbuses. The eclipse in 1999 is as safe as the balance of a life-insurance company; the next quantum jump of an atom is as uncertain as your life and mine.

We are thus in a position to answer the main argument for a predetermination of the future. . . . Phenomena that have been successfully predicted . . . are effects depending on the average configurations of vast numbers of individual entities. But averages are predictable because they are averages, irrespective of the type of government of the phenomena underlying them. . . . The quantum theory . . . makes no attempt to find a definite answer, but contents itself with calculating . . . odds. . . . The quantum physicist . . . studies the art of the bookmaker not of the trainer. (Pp. 300-01)

If this is Frost's source, he has read it well. His "simplified" version nicely stresses the "insurance" aspect of Eddington's presentation (adjusting it to his audience of alumni), while it keeps the central points from particle physics about individual and mass, freedom and determinism. His delight that, in shifting emphasis from certitude to probability, modern physics has made room again for freedom in a world of determined chance is typical. If the dominant certitudes of the day were determinisms, various and variously scientific, then Frost would use the best science he could find to "bother" them, to keep them open to thought. He would also keep in mind the issue's other side, here, that probability does determine the action of the mass. Pritchard's phrase for this

tendency in Frost is "designed inclusiveness."²³ Frost found sources for it in science as well as in art.

The following example of metaphor in science immediately precedes the one just treated. Frost says:

The other day we had a visitor here, a noted scientist, whose latest word to the world has been that the more accurately you know where a thing is, the less accurately you are able to state how fast it is moving. You can see why that would be so, without going back to Zeno's problem of the arrow's flight. In carrying numbers into the realm of space and at the same time into the realm of time you are mixing metaphors, that is all, and you are in trouble. They won't mix. The two don't go together.

Frost likes having said this so well, he says it again: "a charming mixed metaphor right in the realm of higher mathematics and higher physics." Frost has his fun. He puts himself on at least equal footing with science; he reminds it of its presumptuousness and its fashions, and that its newness may be no more than the old come round again. However, this is anything but simple mockery.

Frost is remarkably up to date for a layman. What he describes is, of course, Werner Heisenberg's now famous uncertainty or indeterminacy principle, formulated in 1927. Frost understands its implications for the vaunted certitudes of science. Yet he understands well enough not to exaggerate the consequences. Had he wanted to mock, Frost might have sounded an opening note in the chorus of voices which have used, and abused, Heisenberg's principle by extrapolating from its narrow concern with subjectivity in special cases of the observation of sub-atomic particles to the broad insistence that all science and indeed all knowing are radically subjective acts. Frost has sympathy with such extensions; his assertion that all metaphor breaks down somewhere is proof of it. However, the "where" is important. Therefore, he lets this metaphor stand, to be lived with long enough to be known in its weakness and strength. He also lets it stand because he has sympathy, too, with Heisenberg's (and Bohr's) sense that including the "subjective" element when describing experimental results can lead to greater rather than lessened objectivity.²⁴ Frost's

²³ Frost: *A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 97.

²⁴ L. Rosenfeld, "Biographical Sketch," in *Early Work (1905-1911)*, Vol. 1 of *Niels Bohr: Collected Works*, ed. J. Rud Nielsen (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1972), xl-xli.

deliberate exposures of the subjectivities of his poems—as, say, in “For Once, Then, Something,” “The Most Of It,” and other revelations of the “workings” of the pathetic fallacy—provide a strikingly parallel case. They imply the indeterminacy of all acts of knowing and, with it, the possibility that revelation of indeterminacy might contribute to a fuller account of experience.

Frost’s awareness of Heisenberg’s ideas as early as 1930 again raises the question of his source. Once more, Frost gives a vague suggestion in his off-hand mention of the visitor of the other day, a noted scientist. Biographical material gives no hint who that scientist might have been. Perhaps Frost read reports of Heisenberg’s 1929 trip to Chicago. Perhaps, too, the noted scientist is a figment, a rhetorical device for creating authority and immediacy. If so, it may be that Frost’s source is again to be found in Eddington.

Eddington, if less surprisingly so, is even more up to date than Frost. His 1928 publication of his spring 1927 Gifford Lectures adds to those lectures discussion of Heisenberg’s then very recent formulation.

Heisenberg . . . set in motion the new development in the summer of 1927. . . . The outcome of it is a fundamental general principle . . . : *a particle may have position or it may have velocity but it cannot in any exact sense have both.*

If we are content with . . . statements that claim no certainty but only high probability, then it is possible to ascribe both position and velocity to a particle. But if we strive after a more accurate specification of position . . . greater accuracy can be attained, but it is compensated by a greater inaccuracy in the specification of the velocity. Similarly if the specification of the velocity is made more accurate the position becomes less determinate. (P. 220)

This language, although more Latinate and “technical,” is close to what Frost uses. Moreover, when Eddington discusses the epistemological implications of Heisenberg’s principle, he does so in a way Frost would have found both metaphorically and conceptually congenial. After defining the deductive assumptions underlying the hope of science for a *complete* description of physical reality, Eddington writes:

This theory of knowledge is primarily intended to apply to our macroscopic or large-scale survey of the physical world, but it has usually been taken for granted that it is equally applicable to a microscopic study. We have at last realized the disconcerting fact that though it applies to the moon it does not apply to the electron.

It does not hurt the moon to look at it. . . . But it is otherwise with an electron . . . under the flashlight it will not go on doing what it was doing in the dark . . . the surveillance would itself wreck the whole machine. . . . [This] means that we have been aiming at a false ideal of a complete description of the world. . . . we must be content [instead] to admit a mixture of the knowable and unknowable. This means a denial of determinism, because the data required for a prediction of the future will include the unknowable elements of the past. (Pp. 227-28)

The conclusion is explicit: a quantum action may reveal to us some fact about nature, but the addition "to knowledge is won at the expense of an addition to ignorance. It is hard to empty the well of Truth with a leaky bucket" (p. 229).

Whether or not Eddington is Frost's source, it should be clear that in 1930 Frost was finding in the new physics of the preceding twenty years important parallels to his own long consideration of the essential role of metaphor in thinking, making, and knowing—confirmation of his inklings. Physics seemed to be saying what Frost now wanted to say, and what his poetic practice had long implied: metaphor helps us to see but carried too far can blind us; paradigms build up *and* break down. Like a good physicist, Frost won't go too far the other way either. If extrapolation of the Newtonian macroscopic metaphor to the microscopic realm has proved false, that is hardly warrant for the reverse extrapolation. If knowledge is subjective, it may not be all or only that. Frost's response is "designed inclusiveness," what A. R. Ammons calls for in his instruction to "fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder." Furthermore, for Frost, there is always the Jamesian commitment to a constructed rather than certain world. These essential aspects of Frost's thinking can be more nearly approached by comparing his conceptions with those of Niels Bohr.

Bohr is mentioned in "Education by Poetry." Frost says that he asked Bohr about the freedom of the individual particle and that Bohr replied, "Yes, it . . . can come when it will and as it wills; and

the action of the individual particle is unpredictable. But it is not so of the action of the mass. There you can predict. . . . That gives the individual atom its freedom, but the mass its necessity." Is this accurate recollection; is it meant to convey immediacy and authority, or to imply connection with a Nobel laureate; is Frost putting words in Bohr's mouth? In an uncompleted revision of "Education by Poetry," Frost actually removed Bohr's name.²⁵ What that signifies is unclear, too. Nonetheless, fact and speculation about a Frost-Bohr connection can shed further light on Frost's thinking and writing, and on his relationship to both the science and the intellectual history of his time.

To begin, Frost *did* meet Bohr, in 1923, when Bohr made his first trip to North America. Thompson records that "Frost heard and talked with" Bohr at Amherst College when Bohr lectured on the atom there, and further reports that Frost "met Bohr and had dinner with him in the home of President Olds, who subsequently said that RF's questions addressed to Bohr were far more penetrating than those asked by the professorial scientists in the dinner group."²⁶

In the absence of further records of this occasion, the substance of what Frost and Bohr might have discussed in 1923 is perhaps best indicated by a set of notes taken by the American physicist Frank Hoyt and "recording" one of Bohr's several talks at Amherst.²⁷ Those notes reveal an emphasis on probability in the description of atomic processes which may indicate that Frost refers to an actual conversation with Bohr in his own remarks on particles, probability, and freedom. Furthermore, they adumbrate Bohr's correspondence principle, another idea from modern physics with important parallels in Frost.

The only other significant reference to Bohr in the Frost literature is Louis Mertins' report of remarks made by Frost in 1960: "I have always got on with scientists—but I've been teasy with 'em. I've been close to men like Niels Bohr. Had great talks

²⁵ *An Uncompleted Revision of "Education by Poetry," Published in Facsimile as a Keepsake of a Robert Frost Gathering, held at Dartmouth College, Baker Memorial Library on July 3, 1966.*, p. 9.

²⁶ *The Years of Triumph*, p. 617, n. 9.

²⁷ *The Correspondence Principle (1918–1923)*, Vol. 3 of *Niels Bohr: Collected Works*, ed. J. Rud Nielsen (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1976), 45–46.

with him. Words and science come close together. . . . No conflict."²⁸ Obviously his meeting with Bohr was important to Frost; nearly forty years after the occasion, he recalls it with enthusiasm. Further comment on the nature of that importance will have to be speculative.

In 1947 Bohr was awarded the Danish Order of the Elephant. This required a coat of arms. Bohr chose the Chinese symbol of yin and yang, which indicates that the whole of nature is made up of opposite but inseparable elements. The Latin motto reads: *Contraria sunt complementa* (Opposites are complementary).²⁹ This is a good emblem of Bohr's way of thinking and of his vision of the world. His willingness to seek out "flaws and deficiencies" in his own theories and to resist a too easy certitude is famous as the "Copenhagen" style of doing physics.³⁰ It can be seen in his intellectual commitments.

By 1918 Bohr had formulated the correspondence principle, which claims that the predictions of classical physics and quantum mechanics are not in conflict but correspond. This is so in terms of macroscopic situations, where the effects of quantization are of vanishing importance and the measurements of classical and quantum physics largely coincide. It is so in another sense as well. In situations involving low quantum numbers, the classical laws (we might think of them as metaphors, if only by way of keeping our parallel in mind) break down and must be replaced by quantum laws. The implication of this is precisely *not* that quantum laws replace classical ones everywhere. Rather, both are necessary to the description of the whole of experience: each is appropriate to a particular frame of reference; each, although it is, in a sense, opposite to the other, complements the other. Later, encouraged by Heisenberg's description of the uncertainty relation, and considering the phenomenon that "in the atomic domain, objects exhibit the . . . properties of both particles and waves, which in classical, macroscopic physics are mutually exclusive categories,"³¹

²⁸ Mertins, p. 399.

²⁹ John A. Wheeler, "Physics in Copenhagen in 1934 and 1935" in *Niels Bohr: A Centenary Volume*, ed. A. P. French and P. J. Kennedy (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 223-24.

³⁰ Ruth Moore, *Niels Bohr: The Man, His Science & The World They Changed* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 127.

³¹ "Glossary," in *Niels Bohr: A Centenary Volume*, pp. 371-72.

Bohr began to use the term “complementarity” to describe his sense that irreconcilable views need not be contradictory but may be, instead, complementary aspects of a single whole seen from different vantages. In a recent essay, the physicist R. V. Jones summarizes the implications of Bohr’s notion of complementarity for modern physics (perhaps for modern thought as well): “Following Bohr, most physicists have grown accustomed to having to accept the reconciliation of seemingly irreconcilable concepts, to think constructively forward from the reconciliation, and to regard it as a recognition of the ultimately inevitable breakdown of any single model based on earlier experience.”³² This is parallel to Frost’s thinking about metaphor, even to his language about it. Furthermore, many of Frost’s best poems are specifically constructed so as to hold irreconcilable views in complementary relations.

Frost would also have been attracted by Bohr’s own tendency to think by metaphors which were tentatively held, as in his solar system model of the atom or his liquid drop nucleus. Furthermore, the two might have found common ground in a discussion of language, ideas about which were fundamental to Bohr’s thinking. He conceived of man as “suspended in language”³³ and could go so far as to say, “It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature.”³⁴ These ideas imply a sense of the subjectivities of experience at least as radical as Frost’s metaphorical one. On the other hand, Bohr also shares with Frost a strong desire for certitude. To that end, Bohr, as did Frost, hoped to extend the scope of description in such a way as to increase rather than reduce objectivity. He would do this by multiplying reference frames and by remaining highly aware of the necessary partition, in any act of knowing or describing, between the communicating subject and the object communicated about. For Bohr, as for Frost, the circumstance that, partition or no, there is apt to be an uncontrollable interaction between subject and object is at the heart of the problem of knowledge.³⁵

³² “Complementarity as a Way of Life,” in *Niels Bohr: A Centenary Volume*, p. 320.

³³ Aage Petersen, “The Philosophy of Niels Bohr,” in *Niels Bohr: A Centenary Volume*, p. 301.

³⁴ Quoted in Petersen, p. 305.

³⁵ Petersen, pp. 301–03.

It has been argued that Bohr's "general attitude was epistemologically oriented to an unusual degree. For him, the primary task was to obtain a survey of our situation based on objective description. Yet he did not want to exclude any side of existence, and he felt that from the point of view of complementarity one could understand that there is room for all features of our situation."³⁶ This, too, has much in common with Frost's conception of metaphor and with his poetic practice. Frost's general attitude is also "epistemologically oriented to an unusual degree." Where Bohr's epistemological tool is the inclusive power of complementarity, Frost's is metaphor. For him, metaphor is a way of knowing, which—when a given figure is understood in its strength *and* weakness—can lead us toward a more nearly complete, because more inclusive, or "complementary," grasp of our situation. There is an important difference, of course. Bohr at least sometimes hopes to reduce the inherent ambiguity of language. Frost exploits that ambiguity. There is probably also some difference in each man's sense of the relative extents of objectivity and subjectivity, of certitude and doubt, of the course of history as circular or progressive. Nonetheless, they work in parallel ways, enlarging description to include more reference frames and, therefore, more accuracy, while at the same time recognizing that any "whole" description can seem only momentarily determinate and will eventually break down.

There are other significant parallels between the two men. Each insisted that seriousness and humor must join in the play of the mind.³⁷ Each was concerned to find a way of making the relationship of justice and mercy a complementary rather than contradictory one.³⁸ Each had a Jamesian concern with the problem of will.³⁹ In fact, many of the ideas which Frost and Bohr seem to share may themselves have a common source in William James's thought.

Frost's debt to James has been extensively accounted. Max Jammer and R. V. Jones have noted James's influence on Bohr's

³⁶ Petersen, p. 310.

³⁷ See Frost, "Introduction to *King Jasper*," in his *Selected Prose*, p. 65, and Bohr, "The Unity of Human Knowledge," in his *Essays 1958-1962 on Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York: Interscience, 1963), p. 14.

³⁸ See "The Unity of Human Knowledge," p. 15, and *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 596.

³⁹ "The Unity of Human Knowledge," p. 14.

attempt to define a reciprocal mode of description.⁴⁰ And Frost and Bohr surely share a sense of the implications for language, description, and epistemology of James's notion that attempts at introspective analysis are like "trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks." But what Frost and Bohr most fully share with James is the "suspicion" that what we know is not the world but models of the world, metaphors. James is assertive: all "definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it." "Classification, logic, and mathematics all result . . . from the mere play of the mind comparing its conceptions."⁴¹

Most important in all of this is that neither Frost nor Bohr, no more than James, is incapacitated by his awareness that meaning may be a human imposition or construct. (Here is Emerson, for contrast: "Any distrust of the permanence of laws, would paralyze the faculties of man.") Furthermore, neither Frost nor Bohr accepts or rejects outright the implications of his awareness of subjectivity. Each finds it liberating *and* dizzying. They manage to live in and work with it by surrendering the demand for certitude while still striving toward greater inclusion; perhaps, therefore, toward greater objectivity, surely toward a larger grasp of James's "unity in manyness."

None of this is to claim that Frost was in a particular or direct way influenced by what he came to know of the physics of the 'teens and 'twenties. He was writing poems that can be described by the terms indeterminacy, correspondence, and complementarity long before he became aware of those concepts in science. The ideas about metaphor formulated in "Education by Poetry" after he had become aware of those concepts had already long existed in his poetic practice. Nonetheless, Frost's knowledge of and sympathy with the then new physics importantly complicates the standard view of him as anti-science: he is not; he is opposed to simplistic certitude in any field. Furthermore, knowing what science Frost knew contributes to our understanding of how his poems are made

⁴⁰ *The Conceptual Development of Quantum Mechanics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 176, n. 88 and 177-79, and "Complementarity as a Way of Life," p. 320.

⁴¹ *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp. 489 and 108.

and how they might be taken. Finally, it adds another frame of reference to the vexing question of Frost's modernity.

Frost once wrote, "Success in taking figures of speech is as intoxicating as success in making figures of speech."⁴² This is the challenge of Frost's best poems, that the reader take their metaphors as they are made, take them, that is, with a complementary sense of their building up and breaking down. A related challenge is to take them, too, aware of the various indeterminacies of their instruments and observers: their metrics and forms, their characters and speakers. Such making and taking produces poems and readings of them in which indeterminately described opposites exist together as complements. Furthermore, those complements are not held in the static balance of the supposed New Critical ideal supposedly upheld by Frost's defining poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion." Rather, they take their status as and within events. This is part of what Frost means when he says that a poem "is as good as it is dramatic." In poems, as in tightrope walking, it is motion, the poet's and the reader's, that maintains balance; it is a "master speed" that stays, keeps up, and keeps things up.

Stretching for inclusion is Frost's definitive exercise. It is the same limbering required of the physicist by indeterminacy and complementarity. It conditions his conversation, his letters, his essays, and his poems. Frost's having it both ways, having it many ways, is more than a defensive trick or expedient of drift. It is a deliberate response to a multiplicitous world that denies us certainty yet permits us to assert upon it whatever "velvet," whatever shape, we can. Frost likes both to lay the velvet on and to rough the nap, knowing that too little shape is chaos, that too much shape distorts and causes its own collapse, and that, together, the power both to shape and to see shapes shatter is our limit and our freedom. He bears in mind as well (with another characteristic gesture of "bothering" reconsideration) that we can "take too much satisfaction in having once more remarked the two-endedness of things"⁴³: "A melancholy dualism," he says, "is the only soundness. The question is: is soundness of the essence."⁴⁴

⁴² "The Prerequisites," in *Selected Prose*, p. 96.

⁴³ *The Years of Triumph*, p. 414.

⁴⁴ "On Emerson," in *Selected Prose*, p. 112.

I have argued that the concepts of indeterminacy, correspondence, and complementarity are useful for developing a sense of Frost's poems and of their modernity. As illustration, a single poem will have to serve, a famous one. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" stages its play of opposites at typically Frostian borders between night and day, storm and hearth, nature and culture, individual and group, freedom and responsibility. It works them, not "out" to resolution but in permanent suspension as complementary counters in *mens animi*, the feeling thought of active mind. The poem is made to make the mind just that. It unsettles certitude even in so small a matter as the disposition of accents in the opening line: "Whose woods these are I think I know." The monosyllabic tetrameter declares itself as it declares. Yet the "sound of sense" is uncertain. As an expression of doubtful guessing, "think" opposes "know," with its air of certitude. The line might be read to emphasize doubt (Whose woods these are I *think* I know) or confident knowledge (Whose woods these are I think *I know*). Once the issue is introduced, even a scrupulously "neutral" reading points it up. The evidence for choosing emphasis is insufficient to the choice.

One of Frost's characteristic devices is to set up and undermine a case of the pathetic fallacy in such a way that both construction and collapse stay actively in play. In "Stopping by Woods," the undermining nearly precedes the setting up. "Must" gives the game away, as the speaker (exercising indeterminacy) interferes with the reality he observes, imposing his thoughts and feelings on it. "Darkest" contributes to the pattern. Is the evening, say, the winter solstice, literally darkest? Could it be, given the way that snow concentrates light? Or is "darkest" a judgment the speaker projects? In the next stanza, the speaker's "reading into" nature intensifies to the point where harness bells "actually" speak. Then, *as if* to emphasize that such speaking is a human addition to a speechless scene, we *hear* that the only other sound is the "sweep" of light wind on softly falling snow. Those two categories of evidence, the self-consciously imposed and therefore suspect yet understandable human one, and the apparently indifferent yet comfortingly beautiful natural one, seem to produce the description of the woods as "lovely" and "dark and deep," a place of both

(dangerous) attraction and (self-protective) threat. The oppositions are emphasized by Frost's intended punctuation—a comma after “lovely”; none after “dark,” and the double doubleness of attraction and threat complicates the blunt “But” that begins the next line. Which woods, if any, is being rejected? How far does recalling that one has “promises to keep” go toward keeping them in fact?

The poem's formal qualities, while not obviously “experimental,” also contribute to its balancing act. The closing repetition emphasizes the speaker's commitment to his responsibilities. It also emphasizes the repetitive tedium that makes the woods an attractive alternative to those responsibilities. This leaves open the question of just how much arguing is left to be done before any action is taken. The rhyme scheme contributes to the play. Its linked pattern seems completed and resolved in the final stanza, underlining the effect of closure: *aaba, bbcb, ccdc, dddd*. But is a repeated word a rhyme? Is the resolution excessive; does the repeated line work as a sign of *forced* closure? None of this is resolved; it is kept in complementary suspension. Similarly, the poem is clearly a made thing, an object or artifact, as its formal regularities attest; it is also an event in continuous process, as its present participial title announces and as the present tense employed throughout suggests. At the same time, the poem has a narrative thrust that tempts us to see the speaker move on (even though he does not), just as too much insistence on the poem as stranded in the present tense falsely makes it out as static. In the words of “Education by Poetry,” “A thing, they say, is an event. . . . I believe it is almost an event.” Balancing, unbalancing, rebalancing, those acts are the life of the poem, of the poet making and the reader taking it. Indeterminacy and complementarity are implicit in them.

Frost typically produces effects like the ones described, and he does so in a variety of ways. Similar to strategies in “Stopping by Woods” are those of “The Wood-Pile”—with the “small bird” in the role of the “little horse”—and of “Design,” with its subversive string of adjectives, pseudo-rhetorical questions, and “exaggerated” rhyme scheme. A related device is Frost's tendency to conclude poems with apparently certain and resolving epigrams which, upon examination, prove to be enigmas reopening the very

issues they had seemed to close.⁴⁵ Other poems use other methods for keeping opposites in play. The elaborate story of the mad uncle told by the subjective monologist of "A Servant to Servants" works (in the deliberate absence of any way to know which of the two it is) both as an historical and psychological explanation of her own plight *and* as her imaginative imposition of color on a drab life, that is, as her creative response to her plight.⁴⁶ The several voices of such poems as "Mending Wall," "Home Burial," "The Hill Wife," or "The Death of the Hired Man" multiply points of view not in order to choose between or among them but in order to show any point of view indeterminate, and to leave all points of view as unresolved complements in action. In such poems as "The Oven Bird," "Desert Places," "Come In," or "Birches," the drama is in the combined building up and breaking down of a central metaphor. The last deliberately confuses poetry and (scientific) truth, so that they become poetry's truth and truth's fiction. One way it does so is by assigning to the "matter of fact" voice of truth the extravagantly poetic image of the bowed trees as girls kneeling to dry their hair in the sun. In "Birches," as elsewhere, action (balancing, unbalancing) and event (going and coming back; movement *toward*, not to) are insisted upon.

In a way, "Birches" marks a turning point, a self-consciousness about inclusion that leads to rather static and programmatic versions of complementarity in such later poems as "West-Running Brook." The later poems also more often choose sides, whether because of a shift toward more "social," "light" verse,⁴⁷ or under the pressures of age, personal suffering, political developments, or public and critical responses to the work. Perhaps they more often take sides because of the commitment to "definiteness of position," to "passionate preference," that was always an aspect of Frost's stance in the world. Perhaps they are simply another part of the larger complementary inclusiveness that marks his art. What

⁴⁵ See Robert Langbaum, "Hardy, Frost, and the Question of Modernist Poetry," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 58 (1982), 72.

⁴⁶ See Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 113-18.

⁴⁷ *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, pp. 206ff.

Frost says of wisdom in "Boeotian" is true of his poetry as well: "I will not have it systematic." Nonetheless, the major portion of Frost's finest work, early and late, is a profoundly provisional poetry which reflects, expresses, and enacts ideas emerging also in the physics of his time, ideas that are central to our age. In that, he is, if never modernist, most modern.

"The Place Is the Asylum":
Women and Nature in Robert Frost's Poetry
Katherine Kearns

IN Frost's "A Servant to Servants" the speaker describes her mad uncle. He was kept at home with his family, but within the house was another "house" made of hickory-wood bars, a cage to keep him safe, and to keep others safe. He tore to shreds any furniture put inside to make him comfortable; he removed all his clothes and carried them on his arm. He lived, animal-like, in a bed of straw. The man "went mad quite young," and the speaker believes it likely that he was "crossed in love. . . . Anyway all he talked about was love."¹ The other prominent figure in the speaker's memory is the bride, her mother, brought into the madhouse where "She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful / By his shouts in the night." She witnesses the madness, and she is in her role as bride an embodiment of the cause of his madness. The speaker has left this house with her husband,² moving from the isolated cabin "ten miles from anywhere" to a place with a lake stretching out beyond her kitchen window like a sheet of glass. Her vistas opened, she feels still a prisoner and has escaped outside to talk with the migrant workers camped on her husband's land. She is torn by conflicting desires, "to live out on ground" and yet to keep "a good roof overhead." She knows the power of place, for she has been sent, once, to the State Asylum, where walls are impregnable and the roof is more than sound. Now trapped in a house filled by her husband's hired men, who come

¹All quotations from Frost's poetry are from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, 1979).

²See Floyd G. Watkins, "The Poetry of the Unsaid—Robert Frost's Narrative and Dramatic Poems," *Texas Quarterly*, 15 (1972), 89; Watkins points out that it is never specifically stated that Len is the speaker's husband; it seems, nonetheless, reasonable to assign Len the conventional role of husband rather than brother or lover.

and go readily through doors that remain unlocked, she recognizes an essential truth: "The place," she says, "is the asylum." And of course the statement is the embodiment of paradox, for her "place" is one of "safety" and of potential madness just as surely as was her uncle's cage.

These two figures, the disturbed woman and the love-crossed and naked madman, may be seen as emblematic, for Frost's poetry subtly but persistently reiterates a vision of sexual anarchy. Men and women possess the power to make each other mad, yet it is the man in "A Servant to Servants" who must be locked away. Women are powerful, active, magnetic in their madness, which is manifested in escape from the asylum of households into nature. Men are rendered impotent; they can only pursue unsuccessfully or withdraw into themselves. They have nowhere else to go, because Frost's world is controlled by a powerful femininity. As brides or as keepers, women dominate households. Their houses embody them so that symbolically every threshold is sexually charged; "cellar holes" become pits that represent female sexuality, birth, death, and the grave, and attics are minds filled with the bones of old lovers. Frost's men can no more fulfill their women than they can fill the houses with life and children, and so the women run away and the men follow. Yet the pursuit is dangerous, for it leads into nature that is equally female and thus potentially deadly. While Frost fills his outside world with walls, and with ceilings of dark leaves, and with the bars of birch and hickory trees, nature resists containment and defies control as surely as a woman does. The earth, flowers, trees, and water have almost mythological powers, as if nature were possessed by naiads and dryads and flower maidens, all thriving under the nurture of Mother Earth and waiting, invitingly, for women to discover their kinship. Domesticated sexuality is pale and fruitless compared to nature. The woods in Frost's poetry are indeed "lovely, dark, and deep," and while his households are often left cold and vacant, his nature is enticing, provocative at once of both desire and death.

Men in Frost's poetry are thus potentially circumscribed in their movements. In "The Housekeeper" Frost places a woman, the "housekeeper" of the title, immovably indoors; she is fat, "built in here like a big church organ," she says. Only her fingers work, and

she is beading a pair of delicate dancing shoes "for some miss" who will presumably dance away with a man's heart. Her daughter has run away from her lover and married someone else; the forsaken lover stands impotently outside his house, refusing to enter but paralyzed to act. He is caught almost literally between the classic dichotomy of the mother and the "whore," and while the mother fills his house, his ex-lover has abandoned it for the outside world. His idealized version of domesticity lies out in the yard with his prized fifty-dollar imported Langshang cock and its pampered harem of hens. But his own women describe him as a "helpless," "bedeviled" exotic himself, one who needs extra care and who is, ultimately, in the last taunting words of the mother, a "dreadful fool." Women who stay inside might then incite men to murder by their actions, their words, or their mere presence (the witch of Coös says that her husband killed her lover so that he wouldn't have to kill her), but women outside, in real and metaphorical dress, exert an equivalent, dangerous, sexual power.

"Home Burial" may be used to clarify Frost's intimate relationships between sex, death, and madness. The physical iconography is familiar—a stairwell, a window, a doorway, and a grave—elements which Frost reiterates throughout his poetry. The marriage in "Home Burial" has been destroyed by the death of a first and only son. The wife is in the process of leaving the house, crossing the threshold from marital asylum into freedom. The house is suffocating her. Her window view of the graveyard is not enough and is, in fact, a maddening reminder that she could not enter the earth with her son. With its transparent barrier, the window is a mockery of a widened vision throughout Frost's poetry and seems to incite escape rather than quelling it; in "Home Burial" the woman can "see" through the window and into the grave in a way her husband cannot, and the fear is driving her down the steps toward the door—"She was starting down— / Looking back over her shoulder at some fear"—even before she sees her husband. He threatens to follow his wife and bring her back by force, as if he is the cause of her leaving, but his gesture will be futile because it is based on the mistaken assumption that she is escaping him. Pathetically, he is merely an obstacle toward which she reacts at first dully and then with angry impatience. He is an

animate part of the embattled household, but her real impetus for movement comes from the grave.

The house itself, reduced symbolically and literally to a womb-like passageway between the bedroom and the threshold, is a correlative for the sexual tension generated by the man's insistence on his marital rights. He offers to "give up being a man" by binding himself "to keep hands off," but their marriage is already sexually damaged and empty. The man and woman move in an intricate dance, she coming downward and then retracing a step, he "Mounting until she cower[s] under him," she "shrinking from beneath his arm" to slide downstairs. Randall Jarrell examines the image of the woman sinking into "a modest, compact, feminine bundle" upon her skirts;³ it might be further observed that this childlike posture is also very much a gesture of sexual denial, body bent, knees drawn up protectively against the breasts, all encompassed by voluminous skirts. The two are in profound imbalance, and Frost makes the wife's speech and movements the poetic equivalent of stumbling and resistance; her lines are frequently eleven syllables, and often are punctuated by spondees whose forceful but awkward slowness embodies the woman's vacillations "from terrified to dull," and from frozen and silent immobility to anger. Her egress from the house will be symbolic verification of her husband's impotence, and if she leaves it and does not come back, the house will rot as the best birch fence will rot. Unfilled, without a woman with child, it will fall into itself, an image that recurs throughout Frost's poetry.⁴ Thus the child's grave predicts the dissolution of household, a movement towards the open cellar of "The Generations of Men," almost a literal "home burial."

The husband seems about to learn what the husband learns in "The Hill Wife"—"of finalities / Besides the grave"—but he will learn the lesson *because* of the grave of his son, the once and future rival for his wife's attention. Yet that the grave exists at all is proof

³"Robert Frost's 'Home Burial,'" in *The Moment of Poetry*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1962), p. 104.

⁴See, for example, "The Census Taker," where the rotting and abandoned house never held women; "The Black Cottage," where the boards are warping and bees live in the walls; "A Fountain, a Bottle, A Donkey's Ears, and Some Books," where the doors still hold but the broken windows allow easy entry; and "The Thatch," where a hundred-year-old cottage opens itself to the rain at the dissolution of the marriage within.

of their fruitful sexual union, and it sets them apart from Frost's other couples. In relatively few Frost poems is a marriage specifically delineated as productive of children: in "The Hill Wife," "The Fear," "The Housekeeper," and "A Servant to Servants," children are conspicuously absent, and the Witch of Coös sits with a son who is by implication her lover's rather than her husband's. It is as if conception is thwarted by a jealous nature which pulls women and men outside into a symbolic union with earth rather than a fruitful union with one another. Men and women gravitate temporarily to each other and are thwarted; they try "not to sink under being man and wife," but they mostly fail, their efforts as cosmetic as the new coat of paint and the piano the couple buy in "The Investment." Women leave their husbands and lovers, as the childless Hill Wife does, as if by the power of inertia; she follows her husband into the woods and simply keeps on going, like some wild-hearted Wakefield. There are no children to batten down the doors, or to embody passion in a form that lasts, and so women simply walk away. The son in "Home Burial" lies now in the dirt, to which the mother wishes desperately to commit herself, and while earth is associated again and again in Frost with love, nothing will come of this planting except the dissolution of marriage.

The family graveyard in "Home Burial" is, in the husband's words, "not much larger than a bedroom," an observation that ties not just his own sexuality to the earth and to death but that of all previous generations as well. Jarrell explicates the gravedigging scene in "Home Burial" as perceived by the grieving mother: as if in a dream, she climbs the stairs and looks out to see her husband plunging his spade again and again into the earth. Then she walks down to see her husband's shoes stained with fresh earth, his spade standing against the wall in the entryway. Jarrell says, "Such things have a sexual force, a sexual meaning, as much in our waking hours as in our dreams. . . . When the plowman digs his plow into the earth, Mother Earth, to make her bear, this does not have a sexual appropriateness only in the dreams of neurotic patients—it is something we all understand, whether or not we admit we understand."⁵ "Home Burial," in its committing to earth the proof

⁵Jarrell, p. 123.

of a couple's sexual love, predicts a pattern of imagery, rich and ambivalent, that throughout Frost's poetry relates earth at once both to sexuality and to death. The grave, with its natural and domestic correlatives, becomes a remarkably potent conflation of the point at which desire and death merge into inextricable ecstasy and despair.⁶

In "The Generations of Men" this link between sex and death is given a further identification with household; the action centers on a ruined house, marked only by an open cellar. On the surface the poem seems an innocent tale of new friendship—a young man and woman meet at the old homestead and sit gazing down into "the pit from which we Starks were digged," listening to the matriarchal voice that links the girl to her feminine past. They talk flirtatiously, as young lovers might, yet they are both Starks, and any union between them would be incestuous. The man says, "D'you know a person so related to herself / Is supposed to be mad," and she answers, "I may be mad": the tone is light, but the meaning is not. The cellar image is more evocative than the apparent lightness of the tone suggests, for it embodies gravity, the relentless, seductive, earthward pull that can wrench a burning star from the sky or pull a house into the dirt. This hole in the earth, a larger version of the hole dug and crumbling in on itself in "Home Burial," represents both sexuality and death.

A closer look reveals beneath the innocent conversational tone the pair's fascination with a forbidden sexuality. The young man calls his new friend Nausicaa, thus relating her to a charming scene in *The Odyssey*. The naked Odysseus improvising a loin-cloth made from a tree branch so that he can come out among the maidens is comically sexual. But Nausicaa cannot marry Odysseus, despite her father's wish that she might, and while she leads him to the town, they walk separately the last part of the way so that people will not think that Nausicaa is "husband hunting." Neither may these two Starks marry; they are already so related to themselves that they anticipate madness, and would most certainly generate insanity.

⁶Frost makes this connection almost comic in "Place for a Third," where burial of a thrice-married wife by her thrice-married husband is complicated by the implicit sexuality of bodies in the earth. The wife may not be buried by her first husband because, his spinster sister says, she has "had too many other men."

through marriage to each other. The man imagines taking a charred timber from the cellar and making a new cottage, but he knows that his friend may not enter. He projects for himself this vision:

. . . she will come, still unafraid,
And sit before you in the open door
With flowers in her lap until they fade
But not come in across the sacred sill—

Her entrance is forbidden, but she sits with flowers in her lap. These flowers, a powerful symbol of the female genitalia, control her presence, for she will sit there on the “sacred” threshold until they fade.⁷ By implication she will be excluded from sexual love, barred from a house made from a “charred timber” from the past. There can be no renewed fire in wood already burned, just as there can be no consummation of this budding friendship. Nonetheless, the two are powerfully attracted to each other, despite the symbolic rain that at first seems “to cool the eyes” but then becomes an adornment of the woman’s “summer looks.” The poem ends with a promise to meet again the next day even in rain, or at least, she says, “It ought to be in rain. Sometime in rain. . . . / But if we must, in sunshine.” “The Generations of Men” (originally titled “The Cellar Hole”) seems, like so many of Frost’s poems, aptly named. For despite readings that see the poem as “delightful” or as offensively “genteel,”⁸ the cellar—the pit—dominates the scene, and the “generation” of men, when taken in the context of incest and madness, seems more degenerative than not.

The cellar is traditionally a place of potential horror, often associated with sexual betrayal. Thus its function in “The Witch of Coös” seems predictable, superficially what one would expect from a folktale, and typical to the genre, a place where the consequences of sexual madness reside. Here the victim and the culprit in an affair with a married woman has been buried, the guilty wife helping to dig the grave. Sexuality between the husband and wife appears to have been killed as well, for the wife

⁷Flowers are powerful emblems of female sexuality throughout Frost’s poetry. See “In A Vale,” where the flowers are maidens who talk to the speaker across his bedroom sill, or the strangely sexual “Locked Out,” or “The Subverted Flower.” See also, Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 58–61.

⁸Robert W. Swennes, “Man and Wife: The Dialogue of Contraries in Robert Frost’s Poetry,” *American Literature*, 42 (1970), 365; Poirier, pp. 108–09.

in years afterward prefers sitting by the fire to going up the cold stairs to the bedroom where the bed "might just as well be ice and the clothes snow." The husband in his turn leaves doors open to let in the cold and drive her upstairs.⁹ The cellar here, as opposed to the open hole from which voices come in "The Generations of Men," has a house sitting on top of it, and the potent symbolic value of the cellar as a kind of nether half extends upward, making the house itself a vast symbolic labyrinth.

Figures move up and down staircases, through doors that must be unlocked, opened and relocked. The cellar is sealed to the outside, bulkhead double-doors "double-locked and swollen tight and buried under snow," and cellar windows "banked with sawdust / And swollen tight and buried under snow." These images seem, in the context of the poem's theme of infidelity, guilt, and madness, overtly sexual, as if the house becomes the woman's body. Sealed to the outside, it is nonetheless open to the bones' upward journey from cellar to kitchen, from kitchen to bedroom, from bedroom to attic. Madness often resides symbolically in the attic,¹⁰ as sexuality finds its place in the basement. Here the one leads to the other; the bones represent the woman's guilt and resulting insanity rather than her husband's, who can neither see nor hear them despite his having done murder. The skeleton's upward progress suggests a movement from sexuality to madness, an irrevocable process since the woman insists, "We'll never let them [out], will we son? We'll never." The son says the bones want to return to the cellar, and the mother says they want outdoors, but they will never cross either threshold, both representative of sexual freedom, because the woman has promised "to be cruel to them."

In an ironic mirroring of the situation in "A Servant to Servants," the bones are tricked into the attic, lured upward by opened doors, then the attic door is nailed shut and the bed pushed against it.¹¹ The lover is locked upstairs, a victim of love in a house presided

⁹See also Mordecai Marcus, "The Whole Pattern of Robert Frost's 'Two Witches': Contrasting Psycho-Sexual Modes," *Literature and Psychology*, 2 (1976), 69–78.

¹⁰See, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).

¹¹Poirier also comments on this similarity, pp. 116–18.

over by a bride. Presumably any “love things” that might have occurred in this marriage bed have also faltered and died, for while the woman maintains that “The attic was less to us than the cellar,” the two are so interconnected that the dry bones “brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers” contaminate the bed which is used as a barrier to their movement. The husband is dead when the “witch” tells her story, but the bones continue to “come down the stairs at night and stand perplexed / Behind the door and headboard of the bed.” In this poem, brief lust is replaced by permanent madness just as the lover has become a collection of dry bones. But here, unlike “A Servant to Servants” where the doors all remain unlocked, there are no thresholds to the outside mentioned, nor are there any windows except those exits from the basement sealed so unbreachably tight. The impregnable house personifies the witch and contains her; like the Sibyl grown too old to move, she may be visited but cannot escape.

When there are accessible doors and windows, entry can be forced or escape can be accomplished. Each has ominous possibilities. Often women in Frost’s poems stand and look out windows, and what they see, as in “Home Burial,” is both troubling and seductive. The husband in “In the Home Stretch” senses this, saying, “I think you see / More than you like to own to out that window.” The woman in “A Servant to Servants” discovers that there is more to marital happiness “than just window views / And living by a lake.” She twice calls the lake she watches from her kitchen window “a fair, pretty sheet of water,” as if she is trying to convince herself of its harmlessness. It is, in fact, very much like her, immobilized “Like a deep piece of some old running river / Cut short off at both ends,” but dangerous, with storms that “come up toward the house, / Drawing the slow waves whiter and whiter and whiter.” The lake pulls her outdoors, she says, to “take the water dazzle” and once to “take the rising wind / About my face and body and through my wrapper.” The window frames this vista in a house where the doors remain unlocked and the “hungry hired men” come and go; the woman wonders ambiguously whether they “are safe / To have inside the house with doors unlocked,” thus revealing her own sexual ambivalence in the symbol of unlocked doors, or lowered defenses. (In “In the Home

Stretch" the young movers are called, provocatively, "door-filling men.") The tension in the speaker is personified in nature by the lake, whose water must suggest a deep and troubled sexuality manifesting itself in a self-acknowledged madness. The speaker thus perceives nature in a way her husband doesn't, a distinction made specifically by the husband in "In the Home Stretch" when he says to his wife, "Come from that window where you see too much / And take a livelier view of things from here."

In "The Hill Wife" the woman "sees" nature as alluring and threatening, and she states her fears so convincingly that the tone subverts any rational, fearless response on the reader's part. Her voice is so seductively persuasive, in fact, that it and the voices of other women / outsiders are seen by Patricia Wallace as one locus of imaginative power in Frost's poetry,¹² while Richard Poirier sees these women as imaginative "liars" who invent color in a drab world.¹³ "Her Word" in the first section is in a controlled, prophetic-sounding ballad stanza that lends authority to her voice. Significantly, the ballad stanza form connects her intimately with the second speaker, whose "Oft-Repeated Dream" mirrors the form and voice she establishes in "Loneliness." This objectifying of her fear legitimizes it, making it seem more real than neurotic or insane. "The Smile" (the original title of the poem) is in anxious pentameter couplets, the lines broken by caesurae, and it documents a seeming over-reaction to a tramp's smile. Yet the previous section, "House Fear," while not so urgent sounding, is also in iambic pentameter couplets (ten lines to the wife's twelve). It is again tied consciously to the wife's voice in its shared form, in shared rhymes like "away / gray": "away / gay," and in shared sounds like "inside / wide": "wed / dead," or "learned / returned": "seized / pleased." Thus the mysterious tramp seems genuinely threatening¹⁴ because the objective voice of the second speaker has just established in "House Fear" the isolation of the dark house, which might contain an intruder. The landscape, seen

¹²"The 'Estranged Point of View': The Thematics of Imagination in Frost's Poetry," in *Frost: Centennial Essays II*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1976), p. 178.

¹³Poirier, p. 114.

¹⁴See Lawrence Thompson, *The Early Years, 1874-1915* (New York: Holt, 1966), p. 279, on Frost's own fear of tramps.

through the Hill Wife's eyes and echoed in the voice of the objective second speaker, becomes intensely symbolic: the vacant-seeming house, the birds, a dark tree, a window, and a man "watching from the woods as like as not."

The birds, the tree, the window, the stranger—all become portents, as ominous a "design" as nature's compiling of white spider, white moth, and white Heal-all in "Design." The Hill Wife implies that a man and woman who loved each other enough would not have to care so much when the nest-building birds came and went around their house. Their marriage is sexually empty, a deficiency reflected in her own empty "nest." The childless house is a frightening, vacant-seeming place; they dread going inside after an absence, "preferring the out- to the indoor night." Like the birds in "driven nests," they rattle their door to drive out whatever has settled there, and by analogy, they are the intruders. Their bedroom is haunted by a "dark pine that kept / Forever trying the window latch." The tree has "tireless but ineffectual hands" that in waking hours seem "as a little bird / Before the mystery of glass." The symbols merge and conflate, with the husband and wife like birds, with the tree like a bird but also like a man or a woman with "tireless," dangerous hands, with the threatening stranger in the woods like the dark tree tapping at the bedroom window. The whole tenuous asylum depends on closed doors and unbroken windows, but like the other women for whom nature is an objective correlative, the Hill Wife dreams that the barrier between their bedroom and the outdoors is threatened by the tall pine: "And only one of the two / Was afraid in an oft-repeated dream / Of what the tree might do." The ominous tone suggests sexual violation, the "tireless" hands of the tree seeking and finding the woman or, perhaps more appropriately, her husband. If the tireless feminine hands were to find the man, at least as the wife dreams it, they might seduce him out into the night, where he cannot perform the gestures of control—the furrowing of field and felling of trees—that keep nature at bay. The woman performs the opposite function to her farmer-husband's, for her internal and external landscapes merge, and the wildness in her nature allows her to see nature as wild and alluring. It is a small step from "preferring the out- to the indoor night" to

rejecting the asylum of household completely. She disappears into the ferns and is never seen again, becoming quite literally a "hill wife," subsumed into nature, married to it.

Until the Hill Wife breaks the bonds of household and marriage she is fearful, but her magical disappearance makes her witch-like and powerful, like the roving Pauper Witch of Grafton. The Witch of Grafton is the most flagrantly sexual of all of these women, or was in her youth when she claims to have "ridden" men until they were skin and bones. She is now a pauper, significantly houseless and without a town. Her only claim to asylum is through her dead husband, who is said to have come from one of the two towns who are fighting not to have to take her in. That she was once married is very important, as it establishes her connectedness with all of the other women who have broken domestic bonds. That she thinks herself a witch and has made others believe her is also highly significant. An objective observer would not accept her word, but would think her mad; her madness, which has taken the form of sexual abandon, has corrupted sane men into believing her to have supernatural powers, or has at least allowed them the excuse of her being a witch. She tells the story of riding Malice Huse "all over everything" and then leaving him naked, or as she says, "unblanketed," to gnaw hitching posts in front of town hall. Her future husband, Arthur Amy, was instrumental in disproving her story, but when he married her he changed his tune: "I guess he found he got more out of me / By having me a witch," she says. In other words, her designation as witch gives her absolute license, and her husband takes pleasure in her abandon.

Here then is a woman whose definition as a witch allows Frost to make explicit the paradox of sexual fear coupled with desire. The Witch of Grafton is a woman with no house to contain her as the house holds the Witch of Coös, and as a result she is identified completely with nature. In language both provocative and ambiguous she recalls the past:

Well, I showed Arthur Amy signs enough
Off from the house as far as we could keep
And from barn smells you can't wash out of ploughed ground
With all the rain and snow of seven years;
And I don't mean just skulls of Rogers' Rangers

On Moosilauke, but woman signs to man,
Only bewitched so I would last him longer.

Far from the house, even far from the barn, where fertility and resultant mating, suggested clearly in the image of barn smells in ploughed ground, takes place among domestic rather than wild animals, she shows him “woman signs” and there is bewitchment (of whom or what is not clear) so that she can “last him longer.”¹⁵ She takes him to a sexually symbolic landscape where “the trees grow short, the mosses tall.” Her description of the tasks she set for him is powerfully sexual:

I made him gather me wet snowberries
On slippery rocks beside a waterfall.
I made him do it for me in the dark.
And he liked everything I made him do.

In “The Pauper Witch of Grafton” Frost finally makes explicit the potential in women to induce sexual madness. Men who follow women outdoors are, like Arthur Amy on slippery rocks beside a waterfall, in danger of immersion and drowning in sexuality; for, while the women might disappear, like the Hill Wife, or grow old, like the two witches, nature itself remains powerfully feminine and perpetually renewed and seductive.

Frost’s woods in particular are often powerfully and clearly feminine, as if women like the Hill Wife, pursued by her husband as Apollo pursued Daphne, have become trees. Trees are frequently personified as feminine in Frost, from “Birches,” where they are “like girls on hands and knees,” to “Maple” and “Wild Grapes,” where they are goddesses, arms raised and queenly, to “Paul’s Wife,” where the tree literally embodies a woman. In “A Dream Pang,” a poem whose setting is most likely a double bed,¹⁶ the husband dreams that he has “withdrawn in forest” and that his song is “swallowed up in leaves.” His wife cannot “enter” the forest, but says, “He must seek me would he undo the wrong.” The entry into the forest is clearly sexual and perceived in the

¹⁵The witch who “rides” men is a common figure in American folklore. Significantly, one common aspect of this tale that Frost does not exploit is the ultimate consequence of her riding, which is to so weaken the man that he can no longer plow his fields. Thus, as in “Home Burial,” there is implied rivalry between the woman and the womanly earth.

¹⁶Thompson, p. 311.

dream by both man and woman as a betrayal of the marriage bed. One critic sees the speaker as sharing Young Goodman Brown's dilemma of penetrating too far into the woods; one must go further and define the nature of his sin to be as specific and limited as Dimmesdale's, for he is an adulterer whose lover *is* the woods.¹⁷ Frost's forests represent feminine mystery embodied in post-Edenic nature, and the fall from innocence is thus repeated with every entry into the woods.

Frost's speakers are then justifiably preoccupied with entry into woods, for this movement is fraught with potential ecstasy and equivalent danger: the woods are emblematic of sexual knowledge and thus of death, and while rebirth is a natural consequence in this fallen Eden it is seldom a convincing apotheosis. As Poirier points out, Frost shares with Wallace Stevens a "mind of winter."¹⁸ Frost's tonal and imagistic preoccupation with death over rebirth in such poems as "In Hardwood Groves" and "Leaf Treader" suggests a Puritan mind for whom knowledge of sin and guilt is instinctive and unrelenting, and for whom sexuality, the "little death" that is productive of birth, is the emblem of that fall.¹⁹ Eve seduced Adam into sin and death, and Eve *is* nature. The grave extends upward from the feminine earth into all of nature, pulling downward. The only Eden that can be even imagined is compromised, so that in "A Winter Eden" the snow lifts "a gaunt luxuriating beast / Where he can stretch and hold his highest feast / On some wild apple-tree's young tender bark." Adam is here a "luxuriating" beast feasting on an apple tree barren of apples, so that there is no knowledge to trade for an already-lost innocence, but covered with "young tender bark." The image is corruptly sexual, as the fourth stanza reiterates in its images of "loveless" pairing. Most significantly, Eve does not appear as a woman at all but, by implication, as the tree and the source of temptation. This metamorphosis of woman into tree in Frost's poetry is far more powerful than mere simile, taking his feminizing of nature beyond metaphor to myth.

¹⁷Eben Bass, "Frost's Poetry of Fear," *American Literature*, 43 (1972), 606.

¹⁸Poirier, p. 145.

¹⁹For Frost as Puritan see, for example, Clark Griffith, "Frost and the American View of Nature," *American Quarterly*, 20 (1968), 22-35.

Women may choose to accept or reject this dryad mother Eve, just as they may choose to stay or not within the asylum of household and marriage, and those who fail to recognize their mothers remain domesticated and safe like the speaker of "Maple." The girl of the title has been named "Maple" by her mother, who died from giving birth to her; thus the essential but subtle tie between woods, sex, and death is established in the naming. There is tension between woods and house, as the house is where Maple was born and her mother died. The house was the mother's childhood home, and "Her mother's bedroom was her father's still." The house is built on the slope of a hill, with one story to the front and three stories to the end "it presented to the road." Thus two levels are buried from the front, and while this makes "a pleasant sunny cellar," the cellar comprises two-thirds of the house. These buried levels of the wife's childhood home suggest that the husband lives there as a mere tenant. In fact, he does not know why the girl was to be called "Maple," as if his wife may have been a mystery to him as well. He says to his daughter, "By and by I will tell you all I know / About the different trees, and something, too / About your mother that perhaps may help," thus implying an intimate connection between his wife and trees and woods.

The girl is consciously searching for the reason behind her name, but her unconscious need is to discover her mother. She wants to know what kind of obligation the name confers, "what it asked / In dress or manner of the girl who bore it." In searching she thinks, "If she could form some notion of her mother— / What she had thought was lovely, and what good," she might learn that obligation, which her father has once suggested is to "Be a good girl—be like a maple tree." The search for the name disguises the essential search for the mother, whom she finds without knowing. She and her husband look for maple trees that might have inspired her name, rejecting the maples tapped for sugar (perhaps an allusion to her childlessness) and considering only those shot through with an "autumn fire" and covered in smooth, white bark.

Once they came on a maple in a glade,
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,

And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.

But this lovely, naked apparition is too old; Maple is only twenty-five and this tree "could hardly have been a two-leaved seedling" then. However, the father has said, "your mother, had she lived, would be / As far again as from being born to bearing," no longer twenty-five but fifty. The tree, closer in age to the mother than the daughter, is the mother reincarnated. The girl and her husband do not discern this though "they hovered for a moment near discovery." "Perhaps a filial diffidence partly kept them / From thinking it could be a thing so bridal," but in any event, Maple covers her eyes and stops looking for the secret. The identification between the girl, "Maple," and her mother, the maple, closes the circle even though she never knows; they are both dryads, powerful and elusive, but only the mother has named their condition.

Significantly, while Maple does not recognize her kinship with the trees, the man who marries her feels it powerfully. He does not know her name but says, "Do you know you remind me of a tree— / A maple tree?" This recognition of her essential nature is enough:

They were both stirred that he should have divined
Without the name her personal mystery.
It made it seem as if there must be something
She must have missed herself. So they were married.

The use of the word "divined," especially in conjunction with "stirred," is suggestive here, for it suggests a divining rod, made of wood and mysteriously able to find water beneath the earth. In this context of mysterious attraction and marriage the image of divining, rod held stiffly out in front and pulled earthward, is sexually charged. Yet this energy is diffused into their pilgrimages into woods to discover her namesake, for until the girl can learn to recognize the beautiful maple, arms uplifted and foliage around her feet, as her mother she will never achieve her own sexual power. She does not have to look out windows to see the trees, as so many of Frost's other women, and looks instead into a mirror before which she stands saying her name aloud. But she never makes the crucial connection between name and symbol and is thus thwarted.

“Wild Grapes” also presents these feminine alternatives ambiguously. The speaker is a woman who has never learned to “let go” with the heart. The meaning of this letting go is not clear, for it may be interpreted as the speaker’s tenacious capacity to love faithfully and without reservation.²⁰ It might mean, conversely, that she has not learned to open her heart to love as she was forced to open her hands to drop from the tree (and this reading is supported by the positive movement that results from the opening of the hands to drop to earth, “the right place for love”). In either reading, however, she remains a “safe” woman, for she will in the first instance never wander off from love like the Hill Wife, and in the second, never possess a man with her wildness like the witch of Grafton.

The speaker’s brother in “Wild Grapes” has bent a birch tree down for her to pick the wild grapes that have climbed up through the branches. When she reaches to hold the tree in its arc, it picks her up, leaving her dangling like the grapes, to be “gathered from the birch” by her brother. The birch is queenly, “Wearing a thin headdress of pointed leaves, / And heavy on her heavy hair behind, / Against her neck, an ornament of grapes,” the Bacchanalian grapes and “heavy hair” potently feminine symbols of sexuality and fertility. The girl was an innocent five-year-old child then and has perhaps remained virginal. If one reads her failure to “let go” to mean that she is more dependent on the mind than the heart, then her final defiance, “I had not learned to let go with the hands, / As still I have not learned to with the heart, / And have no wish to with the heart—nor need,” places her among the intellectuals, and makes her as harmless as the invalid poetess in “A Fountain, A Bottle, A Donkey’s Ears and Some Books” who “was ‘shut in’ for life.” That she tells her own story—makes her own poem—supports, against the body of Frost’s implicitly masculine speakers, her uniquely intellectual perspective. In any case, she is no threat because she has never become the fruitful tree but has remained merely the parasitizing vine that clings to it, “foxgrapes” which, as fable has it, are sour and unripe.

Helen Bacon suggests a level of sustained allusion that ties “Wild Grapes” to the darker sexual themes of the other poems.

²⁰ Helen Bacon, “For Girls: From ‘Birches’ to ‘Wild Grapes,’ ” *Yale Review*, 67 (1977), 27.

While the speaker never discovers her identity in the queenly birch, she evokes a tribe of women whose identification with nature is absolute. Inherent in the imagery of the Bacchanalian tree is the myth of the Maenads, followers of the god Bacchus, women who could strike the ground with their thyrsi and make honey and milk well up (as the birch tree as thyrsus produces grapes) but who could with equal power rip men and animals from limb to limb for their meat.²¹ Bacon makes a convincing argument for a sustained allusion in "Wild Grapes" to *The Bacchae*; Euripides' play might stand as a backdrop for many of Frost's other dramas between men and women and men and nature as well. The women in *The Bacchae* have left their homes and husbands and gone out into the hills where they are in the throes of orgiastic worship of Dionysius. Only the old men, Tiresias and Cadmus, are willing to follow and participate in worship; the young king Pentheus wants to spy on and disrupt the women's frenzies, and he wants to find and kill Dionysius, whose stature as a god he disputes. A man designated by Euripides as "The Stranger" warns him against sacrilege, but Pentheus follows and is torn to shreds by his own mother and the other maddened women.²² Mothers in Frost's poetry are often placed in direct opposition to the wishes of men, and the unnamed strangers in such poems as "Home Burial" and "The Fear" seem sentinels who watch the women as they go. Mothers and strangers seem to abet the escape of women into nature, a flight repeated so often in Frost's poetry as to become almost ritualized, and the resistant male who follows, in antipathy to the natural urges that pull the woman away from home, seems equally driven to fulfill an ancient, preordained role.

"Paul's Wife" is also about a dryad, this one taken literally from inside a tree and brought alive through immersion in a pond, this one so utterly seductive that Paul falls absolutely, possessively, in love. Paul is a lumberjack, "the hero of the mountain camps / Ever since, just to show them, he has slipped / The bark of a whole tamarack off whole." This action, viewed in context of what is to come, is a flagrantly sexual undressing. But he is not the master of the trees, despite being a lumberjack who fells and strips them, but

²¹Bacon, pp. 18-29.

²²*The Bacchae*, trans. William Arrowsmith; *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, vol. V, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 155-220.

they of him. He is said to have “sawed his wife / Out of a white-pine log,” yet he is only responsible for pulling the existent woman out. The log from which Paul’s wife comes emerges from the saw a length of wood split darkly down the middle except for a closure at each end. This vaginal-like opening is narrow, so Paul takes his jack-knife and lets enough light into the hollow to see something inside: “A slender length of pith, or was it pith? / It might have been the skin a snake had cast / And left stood up on end inside the tree / The hundred years the tree must have been growing.” He takes the dry, fragile pith, lays it at the edge of the pond “where it could drink,” and it slowly rises a girl, “Her wet hair heavy on her like a helmet.” Her first sound is a laugh. She is newly created, a new Eve, and when she walks off across the pond on the backs of the logs Paul follows. But she is also the snake as well,²³ for she carries in her the capacity to drive her husband from place to place even after she has gone “out like a firefly” and disappeared. She has made Paul a “terrible possessor” with her beauty; she is his goddess alone, and others may not praise her or “so much as name her.” Paul is not in Eden, but in a fallen world where there is no language for innocence, and he is driven from place to place each time someone asks, “How’s the wife?”

“The Subverted Flower” adds a final dimension to the incomplete metamorphoses in these poems, for, because the woman will not become the flower, the man becomes, quite literally, a beast. According to Thompson, the ambiguous accusation made against the flower—“It is this that had the power,”—suggests that the speaker blames the flower for his unchecked desire and his importuning of the woman.²⁴ He is both man and beast early in the poem, his smile of apology replaced by a smile of desire that “crack[s] his ragged muzzle” when he sees her “standing to the waist / In goldenrod and brake, / Her shining hair displaced.” This is indeed a provocative image, and he stretches out his arms instinctively “As if he could not spare / To touch her neck and hair.” Beast-like he is deprived of language, words choking him

²³This image of woman / wood / snake is subtly reiterated in “The Ax-Helve,” where the Frenchman Baptiste stands the finished handle erect and the speaker says it is “as when / The snake stood up for evil in the garden.” Baptiste caresses and feminizes the handle, calling it “she.”

²⁴Thompson, p. 512.

"Like a tiger at a bone." Unprotected because she has gone outside the garden walls, she is afraid to move lest she wake "the demon of pursuit / That slumbers in a brute." She is terrified that he will "pounce to end it all." She sees him as some sort of powerful animal, a tiger, a lion, a wolf, perhaps, until he drops his hands from their outstretched position so that they hang like paws, and laughs ingratiatingly. He drops his eyes in subjection. At this point he no longer has a muzzle, but a "snout," and is an ugly creature which becomes frightened and runs away.

The poem seems straightforward in its allegory of the man turned to beast through sexual desire. But it takes a subtle turn that pulls it back towards many of the poems examined thus far. The woman has the power to madden the man and to make him bestial with her rejection of the sexuality implicit in standing waist deep in flowers with her hair disarranged. She can only see that the flower on which he blames his desire is "base and fetid," words that speak connotatively of sexual corruption and decay. Yet she is herself a beast because she rejects her role as flower. In the battle against the man she has forced him downward from a tiger to a pig with a snout, or a dog, or some worse creature, and she has shamed him into lowering his eyes, a mark of servility in animals. She watches him run and stumble, and she hears him bark, but then she "spits" bitter words like a snake spits venom or a cat spits in fury. She "plucks her lips" ineffectually, much as the man has earlier pawed the air, and she foams at the mouth like a rabid dog. She must, finally, be "drawn backward home" by her mother. She is not a beast in the beginning because she is too much like a flower among flowers, but the metamorphosis of both lovers suggests the inescapable power of denied and subverted sexuality. She is, like the women in "The Housekeeper," "A Servant to Servants," "The Hill Wife," and "Maple," abetted by her mother, who replaces her comb and takes her back into a walled garden. Only a dryad stepping out of her mother tree is free to walk into the woods and set up housekeeping. If the lover wants to come to this subverted flower it will be on the mother's terms, inside walls and into the asylum of marriage, where the cycle of madness and despair will be perpetuated.

Frost's woods can be as lovely, dark, and deep as a woman, but the attraction has all the complexity inherent in our fallen natures.

Eve is contaminated by knowledge, and Adam in his pursuit of her becomes a beast. Desire, domesticated by marriage and contained in household, is eviscerated into childlessness and impotent dread, but when doors are thrown open, thresholds crossed, and escapes effected, it becomes, embodied in the women who run away, irresistibly powerful. All the women who have ever escaped into the world from the asylum of marriage seem, in Frost's poetry, to have died into the earth, like leaves trodden into the mire, to be reborn into nature. Their femininity is both alluring and deadly, provocative of madness and of delight. The only "safe" place is in the cage of hickory bars in the upper floor of the isolated cabin. There the naked and love-crossed madman can "talk" about love, much as the poet writes about it: without endangering himself or anyone else.

Frost and Modernism

Robert Kern

Up until fairly recently, the conventional wisdom about the relation of Robert Frost to modernism, when it was considered at all, was that for the most part there was none—that between Frost's poetry on the one hand and a virtually monolithic phenomenon composed primarily of the work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams on the other, there was and could be little commerce. But over the last several years, as the issue has begun to be addressed with greater seriousness and scrutiny (by such critics as Frank Lentricchia, Richard Poirier, William Pritchard, and others), it has become harder not only to maintain the separation between Frost and his contemporaries but to continue to regard modernism itself as a unified, homogeneous movement in literary history, as though it were an exclusive club with strict rules of membership and with no room for a poet who refused to abandon the formal and generic conventions of traditional verse. The insistence on Frost's difference from modernism, it has become clear, was based on an oversimplification of both.

Whether Frost himself would have welcomed the end of his exclusion from the company of the great modern poets is, of course, another question. His friendship with Pound, Frost once noted, lasted but six weeks, his relations with Stevens were always cool and distant, and Eliot and Williams he hardly knew at all and seemed to prefer it that way. But in spite of Frost's personal attitudes and antipathies, which probably contributed to the general critical sense of his isolation from his contemporaries, one important result of this new attention to him in the context of modernism may well be a new understanding of modernism itself, of the different ways in which it was possible to be a modern poet. And such understanding may derive as

much from considerations of what Frost in fact shares with his contemporaries as from an acknowledgement of the real differences between them. Indeed, in comparing Frost with "certified" modernists like Eliot and Joyce, Richard Poirier points out that despite certain similarities and differences among all three, the differences between the latter two tend to shrink in importance when Frost is brought into the picture.¹ But this is not to revive the idea that Frost cannot be regarded as an authentically modern writer. Poirier's point, instead, allows us to see that he is a different kind of modernist, or that he represents a different degree of modernism—that he is a writer, for example, for whom the pressure or "chaos" of history is less a determinant of poetic form than a provocation to reproduce it in its more or less established modes. "When in doubt," Frost says, "there is always form for us to go on with,"² as though form for him is always something stable and unproblematic in its relation to what lies outside it, a stay against doubt—whereas doubt for other writers may well include doubts about form itself.

The extent to which Frost's modernism is, in this way, qualified, although not to the point where it ceases to exist, shows up in the "Introduction" he wrote for Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper* (1935). Here Frost distinguishes between what he calls "new ways to be new," which involve stripping poetry of many of its conventional devices and traditional procedures, and "the old fashioned way to be new," with which he associates Robinson and is himself in sympathy. The new ways to be new, which are motivated, as Frost bluntly puts it, by "science," call for a process of subtraction or elimination, of trying to write poetry without everything from meter and rhyme to ability.³ But the interesting point that emerges from Frost's distinction here is that he thought of himself as "new," and, as Poirier reminds us, he was in fact considered "an exponent of the new" for the first quarter of the century.⁴ Although we have to look elsewhere in Frost's work for a more explicit account of what he might mean by "the old fashioned way to be new," it seems clear that

¹ Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 39.

² *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), p. 106.

³ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, pp. 59–60.

⁴ Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing*, p. 5.

it cannot simply be a matter of clinging to all the things that the pursuit of innovation for its own sake tries to do without. That would be *merely* old fashioned. Frost's newness, rather, as we learn from several letters written in 1913 and 1914 to his friend John Bartlett, consists in his radical renewal and revision of the Wordsworthian project of appropriating the language of everyday life for poetry. Or, as Poirier puts it, he finds ways of admitting English poetry, both its sounds and metaphors, into ordinary speech, principally that of New England.⁵ And what this involves, more than anything else, is his idea of "sentence-sounds," the seemingly idiosyncratic, ultimately primitivistic notion that sentences are sounds in themselves which can convey meaning above and beyond the collective meaning of the words of which they consist. In the most important of the letters to Bartlett, one that constitutes a virtual manifesto, Frost announces rather grandly:

I give you a new definition of a sentence:

A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung.

You may string words together without a sentence-sound to string them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but—it is bad for the clothes.

The number of words you may string on one sentence-sound is not fixed but there is always danger of over loading.

The sentence-sounds are very definite entities. (This is no literary mysticism I am preaching.) They are as definite as words. It is not impossible that they could be collected in a book though I don't at present see on what system they would be catalogued.

They are apprehended by the ear. They are gathered by the ear from the vernacular and brought into books. Many of them are already familiar to us in books. I think no writer invents them. The most original writer only catches them fresh from talk, where they grow spontaneously.⁶

⁵ Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing*, pp. 13–14.

⁶ Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), pp. 110–11. Further references to Frost's letters, abbreviated *SL*, will be cited in my text. Of the various critical treatments of Frost's thinking about sound, three seem to me to be especially valuable. A good starting place is William Pritchard's biographical account in *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 75–81. For a more rigorously theoretical approach, one that attempts to situate Frost with respect to early twentieth-century formalist and organicist aesthetics,

Despite the self-conscious extravagance of these remarks (subtended as they are, perhaps, by Frost's own sense that he may in fact be verging on a sort of "literary mysticism"), it would be a mistake, I think, not to take him seriously here. He refers several times in his letters to the possibility of collecting and cataloguing the sentence-sounds, and although such a project never materialized, it is clear that his thinking about what he also calls the "sound of sense" informs his poetic production in important ways, explicitly thematized, for instance, in such a later poem as "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same." A sentence-sound, Frost is proposing, is something heard, "apprehended by the ear," rather than, primarily, something understood. The issue here is one not of meaning but of qualities of voice that link meaning to a specific human occasion or emotion. As the metaphor of the clothes line suggests, words without a sentence-sound to support them are mere abstractions, removed from the reality of actual utterance, and in this sense, sentence-sounds become Frost's means of countering the abstract force of language or the "bookish" rhetoric that poetic modernism in general seeks to avoid. They are his way of making a poem *be* rather than just *mean*—which is why sound for Frost, as he puts it in "The Figure a Poem Makes," is "the gold in the ore," the element of greatest value, humanly and aesthetically, in poetic structure.⁷ In addition, at a time when other modernists were responding variously to the lure of the primitive, or returning to origins as part of the enterprise to "make it new," Frost's notion of sentence-sounds bears an intriguing similarity to certain contemporary developments in linguistics. The Danish writer Otto Jespersen, for example, had recently described primitive language in terms of what he calls "sentence-words" and "sound conglomerations."⁸ These were complicated and often massive

see Frank Lentricchia's "Robert Frost: The Aesthetics of Voice and the Theory of Poetry," *Criticism*, 15 (1973), 28–42. The most detailed and focused analysis of the concept of the sentence-sound itself is provided in Tom Vander Ven's excellent "Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of 'Oversound,'" *American Literature*, 45 (1973), 238–51. Although Ven's approach is primarily definitional and not concerned with modernism per se, he comes closest to my own argument when he addresses the *primitive* quality of the sound of sense regarded as the expression of a pre-verbal "emotional energy" (p. 244); see especially pp. 248–49.

⁷ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 17.

⁸ *Progress in Language* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1894), pp. 347–48.

linguistic forms in which the elements of speech, which would later split off from each other in modern analytic languages, are fused together, and what these forms imply, at least hypothetically, is an original *language-word*, a mythic, undifferentiated word-mass containing within it the possibility of all utterance. In his own effort to make it new, at any rate, Frost seems to have invented a primitive or originary speech entirely on his own.⁹

There are, moreover, other grounds for insisting on Frost's modernism (qualified as it may be), ranging from Lentricchia's emphasis on the centrality of post-Kantian and William Jamesian theoretical perspectives in Frost's poetics to Poirier's detailed demonstration of shared thematic concerns between Frost and a poet like Stevens.¹⁰ And yet, one suspects, there is still a stumbling block, a resistance, at least for some readers, in granting to Frost the full status of modern writer, whether it lies in the area of Frost's traditional formalism, or in the insistent ordinariness and conventionality of his subject matter, so firmly based in straightforward narrative, or in the lack in his work of what Poirier calls the "formal dislocation" characteristic of much twentieth-century literature, "the heady mixture of discontinuity and cultural allusiveness" whose supreme instances are Eliot's *Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*.¹¹ To be sure, given Frost's own sense of himself as pursuing "the old fashioned way to be new"—which may mean, in part, that he does not tamper with the reading process—and given his attitudes toward the work of other modern poets in general, it is easy to see why some readers are led to wonder if there is ever a point,

⁹ Hart Crane's speculation that a whole poem might constitute "a single new *word*, never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate," is another, more extreme version of this primitivist strain in modern poetics, one involving a tendency or longing that, as I see it, takes several forms, ranging from the wish to avoid "rhetoric" to the more radical desire for a homogeneous or inclusive speech, a collapsing of words into some primal, original Word. See *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 221. On the notion of language as primal, originary Word, see the discussion of the romantic idea of language, particularly the section on Coleridge's thinking about linguistic development, in Gerald Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 56–59.

¹⁰ For another approach to this broad issue, see Warren French, "The Death of the Hired Man: Modernism and Transcendence," *Frost: Centennial Essays III*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1978), pp. 382–401.

¹¹ Robert Frost: *The Work of Knowing*, p. 48.

in fact, where his qualified modernism becomes *disqualified* as modernism.

One way of bringing this issue into focus, if not completely to resolve it, is to consider Frost's response to imagism (regarded as an early or inaugural phase of the revolution in modern poetry), and to gauge the extent to which the imagist milieu that he encountered in London when he arrived there in 1912 may have affected his thinking about his own work. Frost, of course, has never been considered (and rightly so) an imagist. His work never appeared in any of the imagist anthologies; and although he got on well with F. S. Flint (one of the reorganizers of the original "school of Images," as Pound called it) and attended some of the group's meetings, he apparently found himself at odds with certain imagist ideas. In any case, as one historian of the imagist movement reports, at these meetings Frost kept his silence.¹² But increasingly, in letters and even in such later pieces as the Introduction to *King Jasper* and the obituary for Amy Lowell (1925—by which time the imagist movement was already part of literary history), Frost registered his sense of the inadequacies of imagism. In the summer of 1914, for instance, the year of Pound's *Des Imagistes*, Frost wrote to John Cournos, one of its contributors, that what he was most interested in cultivating was "the hearing imagination" "rather than the kind that merely sees things" (*SL*, p. 130). This opposition between hearing and seeing, between ear and eye, which recurs in many of the letters and essays, developed into a small, continuing campaign against imagism, and became, as well, one of Frost's chief ways of distinguishing himself from his modernist contemporaries.

To see what he was up against, and to appreciate the loneliness of Frost's position, one need only recall the virtual hegemony of what might be described as visualist thinking, both in philosophy and poetics, during this period. In the work of such figures as Henri Bergson, Remy de Gourmont, and T. E. Hulme, among others, verbal language falls under increasing suspicion as a kind of systematic fraud, utterly out of touch with the reality it supposedly names, consisting largely of metaphors which have lost their communicative power and degenerated into the mere

¹² John Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1981), p. 7.

clichés of ordinary speech. Even what was assumed to be the purely literal language of philosophic discourse turned out, for Nietzsche, to be nothing but buried or forgotten metaphor. The remedy, as a number of writers were suggesting, lay in the cultivation of the concrete visual mind, as opposed to the abstract verbal mind. While the verbal mind, in Gourmont's definition, merely repeats sounds, the visual mind has the capacity to create new metaphors and thus to force language to achieve greater immediacy. The following statement by Gourmont, from his *Esthétique de la langue française* (1899), is an early but thoroughly typical presentation of this position:

The ear is the favorite entryway; the Holy Spirit always enters through the ear; but in the form of words and sentences that are engraved in the brain just as they are pronounced, just as they have been heard; and they will emerge from it some day, identical in sound and perhaps bereft of signification. That which enters through the eye, on the contrary, can only emerge from the lips after an original effort of transposition; to tell what one has seen is to analyze an image, a complex and laborious operation; to tell what one has heard is to repeat sounds, perhaps like an echoing wall.¹³

Yet, for their part, the imagists among his early reviewers, primarily Flint and Pound, responded to Frost's first book, *A Boy's Will*, with enthusiasm when it appeared in April 1913. In his review in particular, which Frost included in one of his letters to Bartlett, Flint chooses terms of praise that have a distinctively imagist cast. "Each poem," he says, referring to the five or six he judges to be the best, "is the complete expression of one mood, one emotion, one idea. I have tried to find in these poems what is most characteristic of Mr. Frost's poetry; and I think it is this: direct observation of the object and immediate correlation with the emotion . . ." (*SL*, p. 77). Flint published these remarks in June 1913, just a few months after the appearance of Pound's "A Few Don'ts" in *Poetry*, and about a year after the formulation of the three famous principles of imagism, beginning with "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective."

¹³ Quoted and translated by Sanford Schwartz in *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. 83. Schwartz's compressed account of Gourmont's thought and influence on early modernism (pp. 79–85) is particularly useful.

As a critical response, they are somewhat vague, and they may tell us more about Flint's susceptibility to the power of abstract principles than about the poems themselves. What seems clear, at least, is that for Flint, Frost is working within an imagist orbit. But what is of greater interest, I think, than whether Flint was right or wrong about Frost's poems is the extent to which Frost's theory of sentence-sounds may ultimately have evolved as a deliberate, even defensive, reaction against imagism, prompted by Frost's own pursuit of what he calls "specific images to the ear," as opposed to "those to the eye,"¹⁴ and prompted as well by his need for a counter-theory at a time when the imagist ferment was at its most intense and he increasingly felt it necessary to fend off the influence of Pound in particular.

Regarding Pound himself, Frost wrote, in July 1913, that he "has taken to bullying me," and "He says I must write something much more like *vers libre* or he will let me perish of neglect. He really threatens" (*SL*, p. 84). It may well be that Frost's negative sense of Pound's encroachments upon him led him not only to articulate his own theory in opposition to imagism, and in a more accelerated way than might otherwise have been the case, but to see that his place in modernism, especially those aspects of it identified with Pound, could not but be a limited one. At the same time, it may be equally true that Frost is a modernist by virtue of the very fact that he was forced to theorize, to define a position for himself, and thus to participate in the collective effort, "then going forward in London," as Hugh Kenner puts it, "to rethink the nature of an English poem."¹⁵

Frost's rethinking, of course, is focused on issues of voice and sound, and the closest thing to an imagist poem by him is probably "A Patch of Old Snow," the very poem he uses, in one of his letters to Bartlett (where it appears in a rough prose version), to illustrate his notion of sentence-sounds:

There's a patch of old snow in a corner
 That I should have guessed
 Was a blow-away paper the rain
 Had brought to rest.

¹⁴ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 199. Although I am arguing that Frost's thinking about sentence-sounds was greatly stimulated by his encounter with imagism, it should also be clear that his broader interest in the sound stratum of poetry began earlier in his career, predating his arrival in London.

It is speckled with grime as if
 Small print overspread it,
 The news of a day I've forgotten—
 If I ever read it.¹⁶

It is precisely its closeness to imagist techniques, however, that allows us to see how far Frost diverges from imagist aims. Even in the prose version of it that Frost provides in the letter, the poem is organized, very much in the imagist manner, as a brief comparison of two images, a strategy close to what Pound called the “super-position” of one image upon another, and what T. E. Hulme called “the simultaneous presentation to the mind of two different images.”¹⁷ With some editing it could be reduced to a plausible imagist text. But such reduction would eliminate a good deal of what Frost apparently intends to express, and as an instance of the “sound of sense,” the poem seems less imagist finally than a critique of imagism, since it refuses to pursue any sort of simultaneity of presentation in favor of the consecutiveness of its speaker’s language and the temporality of his experience.

In Pound’s orthodox imagism, on the other hand, the goal is to present “the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.”¹⁸ The classic example is “In a Station of the Metro,” a poem in which thirty lines, according to Pound’s own testimony, were cut down to two:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
 Petals on a wet, black bough.¹⁹

This kind of poem, Pound tells us, “is a form of super-position,” in which “one idea [is] set on top of another,” and although

¹⁶ *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), p. 110. Here is the prose version of the poem as it appears in Frost’s letter to Bartlett (*SL*, p. 111): “In the corner of the wall where the bushes haven’t been trimmed, there is a patch of old snow like a blow-away newspaper that has come to rest there. And it is dirty as with the print and news of a day I have forgotten, if I ever read it.” Pritchard suggests that the poem had already been written and that Frost is simply paraphrasing its content in the letter. See *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, p. 79.

¹⁷ Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 89; Hulme, *Further Speculations*, ed. Sam Hynes (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. 84.

¹⁸ *Gaudier-Brzeska*, p. 89.

¹⁹ *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 35.

in such an arrangement the words “is like” or “are like” may be understood to occur between the two ideas, specifying their relation, to leave out the words creates a sense of fusion, or even confusion, between the ideas, which leads Pound to speak of the “one image poem.”²⁰ Here, for instance, the process of transformation is already under way as we begin to read, since what we encounter is not the “faces in the crowd” directly but their “apparition” in the mind of the speaker, and that “apparition” is then defined as “Petals on a wet, black bough.” In its focus on “the precise instant” of transformation, the poem suppresses the temporality of the process, just as it suppresses any phrase of comparison at the end of the first line, all in the name of the instantaneity of the experience and the sense of “sudden liberation,” the “freedom from time limits and space limits,” that such poems are meant to evoke.²¹

Frost’s poem, by contrast, is constituted by the very time limits and space limits, in terms of its language and situation, that imagist poems like Pound’s normally try to abolish. If anything, “A Patch of Old Snow” presents not the deliberate imagist confusion between figure and ground, between tenor and vehicle, characteristic of “In a Station of the Metro,” but a recovery from such confusion, a moment of clarification or balance that is thoroughly typical of Frost. He is not interested in Pound’s sense of “sudden liberation” but in its aftermath, which constitutes a different kind of liberation—a freedom from or resolution of the very ambiguity that Pound’s poem generates in its refusal to specify precisely how its two images relate to one another. Frost’s speaker makes it clear that his own confusion between a patch of old snow and a blow-away paper, which is what an imagist poem would focus on, was more potential than actual, and that in any case it has come and gone:

There’s a patch of old snow in a corner,
That I should have guessed
Was a blow-away paper the rain
Had brought to rest.

His interest now lies in elaborating on the image, accounting for

²⁰ Gaudier-Brzeska, pp. 88–89.

²¹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 4.

what would have been his mistake and to some extent justifying it, and spelling out the image's further implications.

It is speckled with grime as if
Small print overspread it,
The news of a day I've forgotten—
If I ever read it.

After admitting that what he has seen is not a blow-away paper, the speaker goes on, nevertheless, to explain why he "should have guessed" that he had, refusing to let go of the transformed patch of old snow. Then in the final two lines, he virtually reinstates the image of snow as a newspaper in order to make his point about the transitoriness and pathos of the "news." But that point is conveyed not so much by the image as by the speaker's intonation, the cadence or pacing of the lines themselves. Their effectiveness, Frost says, lies "in the very special tone with which you must say—news of a day I have forgotten—if I ever read it" (*SL*, p. 112), where the speaker, in a kind of afterthought, passes beyond the image to a different level of insight, and to a use of language—discursive, reflective—of which imagism would not have approved.

This emphasis on tone, on the dynamics and sound of a voice, creates an effect very different from that cultivated by most imagist poems. Here the concern is not with "the thing itself" or its "direct treatment" but with the speaker and ultimately the reader, who is invited to enter into the speaker's experience by saying his words and then to recognize, through their intonation, his state of mind. We encounter, through his speech, the inwardness of a person, rather than just objects in the world, no matter how emotionally evocative. In this sense, Frost is working with images to the ear as well as to the eye, so that the reader experiences a voice as much as (if not more than) a thing. The effect is not the imagist avoidance of "rhetoric," the virtual displacement of linguistic conventions by sharply observed concrete particulars (or what Hulme refers to as the bodily handing-over of sensations), but a conscious indulgence in rhetoric, understood as the careful fashioning (or capturing and preserving) of speech-sounds that Frost ultimately identifies with the primitive origins of human language. Poetic speech is thus authorized for Frost not merely by the poet's adherence to the truth of things

seen but by his fidelity to these sounds, which, he insists, are a permanent and original element of language. "They are always there," he says, "living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: they were before words were." And he adds, still squaring off against imagism, "they are as definitely things as any image of sight" (*SL*, p. 191). On the basis of these remarks, though, we may be justified in saying that Frost is not opposing imagism so much as attempting to redefine it, to extend its limits. If images to the ear are things, then Frost is an imagist. And in this way, too, Frost seems to be insisting, in spite of himself, on his own involvement in modernism—a modernism in which the "sound of sense" is as much an "objective reality" as the visual "thing itself," and in which the writer, keeping his "ear on the speaking voice" (*SL*, p. 151), and believing that "the sentence-sound often says more than the words" (*SL*, p. 113), is attempting to return to origins as deliberately as Eliot and Pound do, linking his poem to an originary substratum of language that is prior to literature, to tradition, and even to words.

Frost evokes that substratum, much later in his career, in "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" (1942), a poem that provides a good example of what might be described as his more advanced modernist thinking—advanced, that is, beyond imagism—even as it demonstrates the extent to which his modernism continues to be bound up with his notion of sentence-sounds. It also demonstrates, I would argue, a modernism less or differently qualified than that projected in some of Frost's essays and letters, insofar as the poem raises problems of reading and interpretation that are normally less obtrusive or visible on the surface of his texts. While we do not quite encounter the "formal dislocation" of Eliot or Pound here, we are still presented with a speaker who, like Eliot's Gerontion or Tiresias, bridges great gaps of time and seems both ancient and modern, simultaneously one of us and an intimate of Adam in the garden of Eden. This quality, moreover, casually revealed in the speaker's own sentence-sounds, is completely taken for granted in the poem.

In several ways, in fact, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" is a curious mixture of apparently unrelated motives and effects. For one thing, it is a sonnet. For another, despite its innocent guise of a pleasant "just so" story, it actually consti-

tutes something like a meditation on origins, both linguistic and poetic. Set in Eden, scene of origins par excellence, the poem nonetheless imagines a time when a kind of fall seems already to have taken place, when Adam and Eve have already become aware of their difference from nature. Like Milton, however, Frost does not view this event entirely in terms of loss; it is, rather, the beginning of something else.

He would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds' song be the same.
 And to do that to birds was why she came.²²

Here Adam is presented as the author of a myth about the human appropriation of nature, or the absorption, the transformation, of nature into language—an event which gives rise to the nostalgia of the poem's title even as it marks the beginnings of a full human awareness of nature. "Never again would birds' song be the same," says the speaker, although, by the poem's own logic, what "birds' song" was like before its transformation could not, strictly speaking, have been either knowable or nameable. In this sense, the speaker's nostalgia is misplaced; the poem elegizes the loss or absence of what Adam or the speaker could know *only as* loss or absence. Clearly, a break in continuity between Adam and Eden has occurred, a break signalled by both his nostalgia and his myth-making. At the same time, however, there is a sense in which that myth-making, and perhaps poetry itself, are intended as compensations for the sense

²² *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, pp. 338–39. Tom Vander Ven also deals with "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same" as a poem about the sound of sense, although he treats mainly its tonal shifts, the changing current of its argument, from a rhetorical perspective. See "Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of 'Oversound,'" pp. 246–47.

of loss, imaginary as it may be. To the extent that Eve came, as the poem's last line suggests, in order to humanize nature, it is to her coming that we owe whatever knowledge of nature we have, along with myth, poetry, and this very poem.

But the poem's complexity is not only thematic; it also lies in the manner of its telling, particularly in the relation of its speaker to Adam, whose thinking is reported to us in an apparently noncommittal indirect style that seems at odds with myth in its tentativeness and in its almost fussy reliance on terms that belong to logical discourse (itself, perhaps, a sign of the fall). Who, we must ask, is speaking here? As the poem proceeds, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the speaker from Adam, to distinguish quotation from narration. Only the tenses of the verbs remind us that we are listening to a mediated discourse, a description of someone else's thinking; and in the last line of all, which could reasonably be understood as either Adam's or the speaker's, even that indication disappears. If the speaker begins at some distance from Adam, allowing for the possibility of an ironic account, one in which modern skepticism exposes or at least stands apart from primitive belief, such a gap narrows considerably, if not completely, by the end of the poem, where the speaker seems fully involved in Adam's vision. On the other hand, the speaker is careful to suggest that Adam himself is not entirely committed to what he nevertheless "would declare," and we have to wonder if the speaker, in speaking for Adam, is being more or less diffident about his myth than Adam himself would be. In other words, how faithful a version or translation of Adam's own language is this speaker providing (not a trivial question about a poem by Frost, famous for his remark that poetry is what gets lost in translation)? Do such terms and phrases as "Admittedly," "Be that as may be," and "Moreover" reflect the attitudes of Adam, or the speaker, or both? And does the rational tone that they convey work ultimately to undermine or to signal an acceptance of Adam's myth? In any case, the mythic is being viewed here, it would seem, from a decidedly "fallen" point of view, one characterized not by visionary or imaginative certainty but by a cautious and reasonable consideration of possibilities.

Adam's vision itself, of course, is focused most centrally on what the poem calls Eve's "tone of meaning" and its influence

upon the birds. "From having heard the daylong voice of Eve," we are told, the birds in the garden "Had added to their own an oversound, / Her tone of meaning but without the words." By "tone of meaning" here we can understand, precisely, Frost's sentence-sound. It is a kind of pure intonation, a substratum of speech that can apparently cross over from human beings to birds and be reproduced by them in a way that thereafter becomes meaningful to human ears, or at least perceptible as "song." This crossing over can take place, however, only because it is not meaning but sound that the birds pick up and convey. In Frost's conception, one which plays an interesting variation on traditional notions of linguistic origins, a language of spoken words is preceded or underlain by a language of sounds without words, and like most notions of an original or ideal language, this one is both *prior* to actual speech, and so free of the problems of signification, and somehow communicative nevertheless.²³ This is the language that Adam hears as an "oversound" in the voices of the birds. Appropriately, since the poem is a sonnet, this language seems to be a language of love, of "call or laughter," in which meaning is conveyed by tone without the need for words. Strictly speaking, though, it is not meaning but the *sound* of meaning, the *sound* of sense, that Adam hears. What he responds to or recognizes in the sound is a meaning already identified with it in his relationship with Eve.

For the poem is not about the origin of language so much as it is about its humanizing power, its capacity to separate nature from itself and make it the reflection of human meanings. In this sense, in narrating the event of Adam's "discovery" of birds' song, the poem's speaker is locating the origin of a lyric tradition, the very tradition in which his poem participates by imagining that Eve is "in their song"; and again, it is Eve herself, by her coming, who has precipitated this event and who therefore stands as the ultimate cause not only of myth and poetry but of the human passage from nature to culture. In arriving at this realization in the poem's final line, the speaker seems, in addition, to be aware that what Eve has done to the birds she has

²³ For an interesting discussion of the various notions of the origin of language relevant to American literary history, see John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 33-34.

also, in some sense, done to him—that he and his language, even with its “Admittedly” and “Moreover,” are equally the results of her naturalizing/humanizing act. Thus the poem is not simply about Adam’s myth; it is about itself in relation to that myth, and its final line, however obliquely, offers the speaker’s awed recognition of the connection, of the way his poem is implicated in the very tradition whose origin it describes. What makes the poem modern, beyond the fact of the problematic nature of its speaker and his curiously indirect discourse, is precisely this sense of its connection with poetic origins, its speaker’s sudden apprehension of the continuity of his own utterance with the mythic origin of poetic utterance in his own account of it.

Frost’s stance in the poem, finally, with respect to myth and the primitive, is perhaps not unlike T. S. Eliot’s attitude toward *The Golden Bough*. Frazer’s great book, Eliot suggests, “can be read in two ways: as a collection of entertaining myths, or as a revelation of that vanished mind of which our mind is a continuation.”²⁴ Frost’s poem, it seems to me, can similarly be read as an entertaining myth or as a revelation of the kind Eliot describes, a revelation of continuity. What I am suggesting, though, is that it is precisely the latter reading that allows for location of the poem in a modern context, one in which the poet discovers that his poem, and his very language, are conditioned if not caused by history. This is not, to be sure, the modernism of absolute beginnings, of Pound’s “Make it new,” but its other side—the modernism of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (or, for that matter, of Pound’s own question, posed in a letter of 1908, “Why write what I can translate out of Renaissance Latin or crib from the sainted dead?”²⁵), in which the writer comes to recognize that his task involves a struggle with meanings already inscribed in language. Indeed, to work in terms of this recognition may be just what Frost means by “the old fashioned way to be new.”

²⁴ “London letter,” *Dial*, 72 (1921), 453; quoted in Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), p. 195.

²⁵ *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 4.

"The Lurking Frost": Poetic and Rhetoric in "Two Tramps in Mud Time"

Walter Jost

IN his encomium "On Emerson" (1959) Robert Frost unites what most of us are inclined to keep separate, when he praises the "poetic philosopher" and the "philosophic poet," and then whimsically adds "my favorite kind of both."¹ It is useful to recall that "philosophy" for Frost is closely allied to Jamesian pragmatism,² hence to action, experience and effect in the persuasive interpretation of reality. These are equally the concerns, Aristotle has argued, of the art of rhetoric,³ so that the Frost reader has good reason to be on the lookout for a partnership between rhetoric and this philosophic poetry. In the past the bias of the New Criticism has deflected attention from the poem as voice addressing a public, to the poem as well-wrought urn, with the result that most critics have tended to treat condescendingly Frost's interest in argument and persuasion, in favor of their own neo-romantic lyric preoccupation with Self.⁴ The

¹ Selected Prose of Robert Frost, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 111-19.

² See Frank Lentricchia, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1975), esp. ch. 1.

³ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I, 1-3, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 3, 1112bff., and V, 4. See also Cicero, *De Oratore*, I, XV, 68. On William James as a rhetorical philosopher, see Alan Brinton, "William James and the Epistemic View of Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 68 (1982), 158-69.

⁴ See, for example, James G. Hepburn, "Robert Frost and His Critics," *New England Quarterly*, 35 (1962), 376: "He is primarily a lyric poet; and, as he says elsewhere, the aim in lyric poetry is not mainly implication: the aim is song"; also Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 275. Lentricchia, p. 144, focuses on the post-Kantian strain in modern poetics, to the near total exclusion of that didactic Renaissance humanism which Frost shares with Arnold, Whitman and Emerson: "When we grasp Frost's landscape . . . we are not gaining a form of sharable knowledge of a common public reality. What we gain, initially, is . . . a shaped vision of reality (a fiction) that the poet finds therapeutic." While Lentricchia concedes that what Frost found therapeutic the reader might also, Lentricchia's emphasis is on the

yield has been fruitful but one-sided. Even passing familiarity with Frost is enough to show that many of his poems argue, exhort, persuade and "philosophize" along practical, prudential lines. In this essay my purpose is to delineate Frost's rhetorical stance by closely analyzing one of his most representative and misconstrued poems.

Like many of Frost's poems, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" unites divergent lines of thought by placing in tension opposed or contradictory values:⁵ the self and the other, the literal and the symbolic, the general and the particular, the straight-forward and the ironic, and so on. It is generally agreed that, at the end of the poem, Frost leaves it to his readers to apply to their own lives, to their "avocations and vocations," the maxim that love and need, work and play, can and should be one. But less agreement exists as to the message and quality of this "editorializing."⁶ Malcolm Cowley disapproved of the whole poem, calling it "an inexplicably embarrassed and apologetic effort." George Nitchie thought it a "fooling around with abstractions . . . hard to distinguish from a Thought for the Day."⁷ Yet John C. Kemp and Robert Berkelman admired it, and George F. Whicher called it "a fine narrative piece."⁸ Regarding the poem's message, critics have focused on whether or not the narrator-author should be understood to have surrendered his job of wood-cutting to the tramps who need the work. The wood-cutting is obviously

"singularity of consciousness" and attitudes—as though constituting reality symbolically is necessarily an individual and exclusively an emotional achievement. My own argument is that it is public and perfectly sharable as practical wisdom. George Nitchie recognizes Frost's strong rhetorical impulse but is too ready to relegate it to "the cracker barrel and the symposium in the country store"—*Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1960), p. 59. That Frost's rhetoric sometimes falls flat is undeniable; what is needed is some account of when and how it succeeds.

⁵ See Robert G. Berkelman, "Robert Frost and the Middle Way," *New England Quarterly*, 35 (1962), 347–53, for a non-rhetorical account of the kind of rhetorical uniting of opposites I refer to here. For a very inadequate treatment of Frost as philosopher, see John Morris, "The Poet as Philosopher: Robert Frost," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 11 (1972), 127–34.

⁶ Reginald Cook, *Dimensions of Robert Frost* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 124.

⁷ "The Case Against Mr. Frost: II," *New Republic*, 111 (18 Sept. 1944), 345; Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 154; Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, p. 273.

⁸ Kemp, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 222–23; Berkelman, "Robert Frost and the Middle Way"; George F. Whicher, "Frost at Seventy," *American Scholar*, 14 (1945), 405–14.

symbolic, so the matter is usually re-framed as follows: is Frost urging that we sacrifice self for others, or are we to expect those "others" to look out for themselves?⁹

In their pursuit of answers to these questions critics have shared the method of establishing the poem's meaning by paraphrasing the last stanza and juxtaposing it with similar explicit statements in other Frost poems. The fallacy in this practice is assuming that Frost's more "direct"¹⁰ poetry warrants, on that basis, reduction to paraphrase at the expense of asking how the poem *works*—as though rhetorical meaning is separable from poetic manner. It is well known that Frost denied the separation of form and content, and in fact "Two Tramps in Mud Time" instances a unity of form and content (and the unity of its other opposed pairs) in ways not yet seen or appreciated. We are forced as we read to see its pairs of terms as implacably opposed, but we are also schooled in rhetorically sophisticated ways to discern the ties that bind each of them and their identity-in-difference. Only by attending to what the poem is *doing*, however, can we learn what it is saying.

We will need to proceed patiently at first, identifying particulars, but ultimately our concern with method will have the dual effect of placing the critics' ideological concern over the tramps in perspective, and showing, more importantly, how rhetoric is that "philosophic" dimension in Frost's poetry, poetry he hoped would "begin in delight and end in wisdom."

I

From the first stanza onward much of the delight and typical Frostian playfulness of this poem arises from its kinesthetic and visual imagery, its simple narrative line, and its familiar

⁹ On this question, according to Lawrence Perrine, "'Two Tramps in Mud Time' and the Critics," *American Literature*, 44 (1973), 671, "The common misconception is that the speaker finally keeps the task of woodchopping for himself. The poem's clear implication is that he yields it to the tramps." See also Kemp, *Frost and New England*, pp. 196–97, who agrees with Perrine too, but for reasons that go beyond his essentially correct but superficial and sometimes misleading analysis.

¹⁰ Cook, *Dimensions of Robert Frost*, p. 24. Cf. Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 155: "But it seems to me that 'Two Tramps in Mud Time,' like most of Frost's poems that propose or seem to propose formulas, suffers by comparison with many of his non-formula poems. . . ."

homespun truth about the end of life. Together these make an engaging story. In addition, however, they move us at deeper levels until we do come to that "wisdom" which completes our "delight." How is this achieved?

We can start toward an answer by noting how subject matter and its manner of treatment divide the poem into several parts. First, stanzas one through five introduce us to the narrator-woodcutter interrupted at his task, at his "job," which is also a giving loose to his soul. They then develop our sense of time and place, half-winter half-spring (one of many pairs of opposites held in check in this section), when the bluebird, not "blue," "wouldn't advise a thing to blossom." Each of these five stanzas falls neatly into halves ("splinterless as a cloven rock"), the fourth line always end-stopped, and the rhymes internally confined to the quatrains, reinforcing the feeling of opposites held balanced. Each stanza places in tension one or more pairs of images, ideas or values, so that the very image of splitting wood, of dividing wholes, becomes a metaphor for the action of the poem itself. The friendly tramps, for example, are more than they seem, they have ulterior motives, and in this they are not unlike the narrator who is "caught," as though guiltily enjoying himself under the pretense of working; their words of encouragement have the ironic effect of throwing him off his "aim"; the physical act of wood-cutting is at the same time an expression of his more spiritual self; the warm sun and the cold wind, the still air and the frozen peak, mid-May and mid-March, all are natural "opposites" or counterparts; and in the climactic fifth stanza, the running water feels the "lurking frost" fasten upon it its terrible (yet delicate) "crystal teeth." Finally, a progression of verb tenses, from past to present to future, strengthens the sense of comprehensiveness and closure.

Second, stanzas six through eight shift our attention back to the woodcutter and the "two hulking tramps" recently emerged "out of the woods" from the lumber camps, who reinvigorate the narrator at his task "By coming with what they came to ask," namely his "job for pay." Stanza seven insinuates that there is a rift between them—"They thought all chopping was theirs by right"—which stanza eight qualifies and brings to a crisis: "Nothing on either side was said. / They knew they had but to stay their stay / And all their logic would fill my head":

As that I had no right to play
 With what was another man's work for gain.
 My right might be love but theirs was need,
 And where the two exist in twain
 Theirs was the better right—agreed.

Now here is a curious moment in the poem, for it is the only time in which one of two opposing elements—the tramps, their ideas and “logic”—wins out over an opposing element—the narrator, or the values of play and pleasure imputed to him, so the narrator supposes, by the tramps themselves (for after all this “exchange” of arguments is entirely mediated by the narrator himself). Though short-lived, this verbal victory has been carefully prepared for on the formal level, for each stanza of this section is noticeably differentiated from stanzas one through five by an end-stopped third line. So small a change has the significant effect of dissolving the internal integrity of the quatrains, and so of destroying the sense of opposites held in check—as though signalling a departure from the balance established previously. Now each stanza amplifies single objects of attention—the narrator in stanza six, the tramps in seven, and the tramps’ triumph of logic in eight. Values have thus continued to contend with each other, now across, not within stanzas; but they do not remain in tension, ending up instead at the “logical” dissolution of one of the terms (the “right” of love or play) in eight.

But then of course it is stanza nine, not eight, which ends the poem, and here again, in this third part, we find something unique. Stanza nine reaches back both to stanzas one through five for its symmetrical 4/4 line pattern and its featuring of opposites, and to stanzas six through eight for the way it amplifies a single theme (avocation/vocation, love/need, work/play, now unified “as my two eyes make one in sight”). In other words form and content in sections one and two are unified in section three. More important, stanza nine equally reconciles all of those other paired opposites, which now, from a larger point of view, are at least implicated as necessary parts of a single truth. The argument of the tramps has encountered a more potent claim to which it submits, and the poem in this way unifies what before it split apart. In fact this new unity invites us to re-consider those oppositions as the *basis* of that unity, and is the reason why we

hear stanza nine as something other than abstract commonplace and pontification.

II

But yield who will to their separation,
 My object in living is to unite
 My avocation and my vocation
 As my two eyes make one in sight.
 Only where love and need are one,
 And the work is play for mortal stakes,
 Is the deed ever really done
 For Heaven and the future's sakes.

In the first quatrain of this final stanza Frost explicitly lifts his subject matter to a higher significance, from woodcutting to the whole of life, and from pragmatic motives to the idealistic "object in living"; and in the second quatrain he superimposes onto the key topics and their meanings from stanza eight—"play," "work," "love," and "need"—a range of new meanings to give at least minimal definition to this broader scope. Previously "work" and "need" primarily meant "work for gain," for survival wages; "play" and "love" primarily meant physical pleasure, enjoyment, diversion. Now, without losing these meanings, the words undergo indefinite expansion. Since "deed" applies to any act, and since the future is contingent and variable, the words cannot be locked into or reduced to past uses.¹¹ Hence the relative indeterminacy of these words, which recall past uses only as examples, as possibilities, and which thus may be used as resources for the future.¹²

But while the terms can be seen as resources for deliberation, they also direct us retroactively to the deeds recounted in the

¹¹ It is an indication of their ideological preoccupation with the woodchopping, as job or as symbol of labor, that critics have inadequately accounted for this transformation and expansion. Lawrence Thompson, *Fire and Ice* (New York: Holt, 1942), pp. 211–12, sees the expansion but wrongly reduces "love" to "pleasure." Cook, *Dimensions of Robert Frost*, p. 122, records the change but construes it too narrowly: "In effect, it is a political poem. . ." For Whicher, "Frost at Seventy," p. 413, stanza nine urges a "philosophy of employment," while for Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost: II," p. 345, it is a "sermon on the ethical value of the chopping block." Perrine ("Two Tramps in Mud Time" and the Critics," p. 674) and Kemp (*Frost and New England*, p. 196) note the change but unnecessarily restrict its significance to self-reflexive commentary on the craft of writing.

¹² After all, it is not (as Lentricchia suggests) Frost's own personal "fiction" that we are offered, but *advice* spoken "for the common good."

poem, and to the poem itself as deed. That is, if in fact we do find persuasive the claim made at the end of the poem, that we need to combine work and play if we want any deed "really" done, perhaps it is because we have been given reasons to find it so, reasons in the "work" or act of the poem which lead us to believe that such a unity is feasible, desirable, necessary. I believe that we have been given such reasons, but it requires looking at stanzas one to eight from two different perspectives in order to see Frost's own uniting of opposites. In this regard the metaphor of eyesight—of uniting different perspectives—in stanza nine could hardly be more apt for this hewer of wood, and of large intellectual issues, identifying as it does theory with practice, the philosopher who fully *sees (theoria)* with the fore-sight of the pragmatic man of action.

Before we examine those reasons, however, we need to be aware that the effect of the transformation of terms in stanza nine is such as to imply (what we only sensed previously), that the tramps, like the narrator, symbolize a distinct *modus vivendi*, one justified, moreover, by their common-sense logic. And it is noteworthy that this logic or argument is *prima facie* as reasonable to us as it is to the tramps and narrator: "work" and "need" do clearly take precedence over what in the eyes of the tramps are non-necessary "love" and "play" (for if they didn't no one would survive long enough to enjoy much of anything—"agreed"). And yet this argument presupposes a principle of "divide and conquer," a need to rank divided loyalties, which may not be so acceptable when the terms of the discussion are expanded to take in the whole of life. Stanza nine in effect offers a new principle, of separating without dividing, which equally applies to the job of wood-cutting, as well as to the rest of the poem's many contradictory pairs. On reflection, then, the very act of splitting wood becomes emblematic of the possibility of discriminating without dividing, for it is in their having been split that the oak blocks become usable firewood; the splitting itself is a unified "deed"; and the physical deed is also an expression of the spiritual soul. Likewise the contending elements of warmth and cold, the bluebird's song and the earth's silence, light and dark, above all water and frost: each pair symbolizes aspects of the integrated life when seen from the vantage point of the ninth stanza.

We need, then, to consider in some detail the art with which Frost achieves his integrated view of things, which is itself integrating in subtle ways, and which will account for the fact that we find stanza nine fitting and persuasive, and no less pragmatic than the view of the tramps which it supplants.

III

Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath . . .

Frost's admonishment to us here not to forget to accommodate antithetical norms illustrates the fact that we *do* forget, that we normally seek to avoid or escape oppositions of the sort that we find in stanzas one through eight, which are themselves reconciled only in stanza nine: the tension, for example, between the various contradicting images and values in one through five; between pleasures we naturally love and the reasonableness or prudence we know we need; and ultimately between one code of prudence (the tramps') and another (the narrator's). These tensions are so arranged as to climax on an emotional level in the excerpt from stanza five above, with the images of water and frost, the pleasurable preferred to the painful (so the narrator needs to remind us, "don't forget"); and on a more intellectual level in stanza eight, with the logic of the tramps over the weaker right attributed to the narrator—reason over feeling, prudence over pleasure (hence the easy "agreed")¹³. Although diverse, these contrasting images, values, and ideas align in sequences of association summarized in the topics "love," "need," "work" and "play." For instance, love and play first represent the physical delight both in "muscles rocking soft / And smooth and moist in vernal heat," and in the other vernal images as well; and then represent more generally (in stanza eight) any pleasure in life or life of pleasure ("My right might be love . . ."): *love-play*: narrator, woodcutting, warmth, air, brightness, bird, water, life of muscles, vernal heat—in short, everything in life we are "glad of," symbolized most effectively by the vital water of "brook"

¹³ Compare, for example, Kemp, *Frost and New England*, p. 197: "the speaker accepts (with some reluctance) the tramps' 'right'. . ." Kemp does not explain why the narrator is to be heard as reluctant; below I argue that the speaker can be heard as fully accepting of the tramps' view, which he sees as true *as far as it goes*.

and "pond" in five. By contrast, need and work first represent tactics for survival in the marketplace, and then more generally any struggle, difficulty or necessity that "lurks" or "hulks" "out of the mud" or woods, or just out of sight: *work-need*: strangers, blows, coldness, earth, darkness, silence, frost, tramps, cold logic—in short, everything in life we "dare not speak," "spare to strike," and wish to "forget."

Now the point is that these associated images, ideas, and values are arranged and treated by a method of disjunction and subordination, a pattern which structures and determines *how* we consciously react to the world presented in stanzas one through eight. Here it is not so much that we agree with what the tramps say, as that we see things in the way they do, by division and negation. This is the tramps' own method and *modus vivendi*—one hardly unfamiliar to us, or opposed to the way we normally act—which Frost exploits in the form of the poem itself. We are all adept enough in life at being "glad of" what gives pleasure and at shunning ills, just as we are, on the other hand, prudent enough to subordinate pleasure to the need to survive. Thus we appreciate what in nature is pleasurable, and tend to avoid what is difficult and associated with struggle and need (the cold, dark, silent, frozen). Rhetorically, this tendency to see things as existing "in twain" (separate in the sense of opposed and contradictory) is the "common place" we occupy at the beginning and throughout most of the poem ("yield who will to their separation"), which Frost explores for its powers and limits. Accordingly he has us identify on the one hand with the narrator and the images associated with him, and to feel reserve toward those "strangers" who "put him off," and caution or fear at the images associated with them (mud, mid-March, frost, teeth). On the other hand he has us agree with the *tramps* against the pseudo-narrator's sentimentalized love and self-absorbed play.¹⁴ The point is that in both cases the two exist "in twain".

As a result, commentators have always seen the tramps and narrator as locked into opposition.¹⁵ And yet, although we don't

¹⁴ Only if we agree to some extent with *both* tramps and narrator will their debate be interesting at all: over-identification with either side would tend to nullify any sense of an important issue to be solved.

¹⁵ See, for example, Perrine, "'Two Tramps in Mud Time' and the Critics," p. 673:

come to realize it until stanza nine, in stanza eight we don't know what the narrator *really* believes. Actually he is not opposed to the tramps at all: his "right" only "might be love" (pleasure, etc.), and turns out not to be. Until the last, however, the narrator's true position is subordinated to the one attributed to him (which is subordinated in turn to the tramps' own view). The narrator, Frost himself, is "lurking" behind a second or pseudo-self, momentarily eclipsed by a world-view in which the terms of the debate are set—and more importantly by a world-view whose chief characteristic is that there is a debate at all. In short, Frost achieves his effects by manipulating the point of view from which we see and understand the world of the poem.¹⁶

This becomes clearer in stanza nine, which not only talks about those preceding oppositions as unities, but which *unifies* them with various rhetorical devices: paradox ("work is play"), pun ("play for mortal stakes"), simile ("as my two eyes make one in sight"), repetition of the conjunctive "and," unity of idea (the idea of unity itself), and the unifying of form and content of the previous two sections. As a result we learn (or remember) a way of seeing oppositions as unified wholes, which resolves conflict not by avoidance or negation, but by asserting the equal importance of the opposed parts, in nature (cold and warm, water and frost), in self (body and soul, avocation and vocation), in human relations (love and need, narrator and tramps), and in our relations with the transcendent (Heaven and the future's sakes).

Again, contrast this view and its methods with our mode of apprehension in the first two sections. Section one (1–5) controls how we evaluate its images by juxtaposing opposites, presenting first what is the more obvious and pleasurable, and then balancing that with the less obvious and somehow more threatening or difficult. Arrangement is crucial, for it suggests the precariousness of our satisfaction with the seemingly self-evident (the

"Here the dichotomy of motivations is as clear-cut as can be: The speaker's motivations are 'play' and 'love'; the tramps' motivation is 'gain' or 'need.'" While it is true that the dichotomy is clear-cut, the motivations of the speaker are purposely kept ambiguous.

¹⁶ Cf. Lentricchia, *Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self*, p. 106: "Overt magic-making is acceptable in the world of this poem ['Mending Wall'] because we are governed by the narrator's perspective." Manipulation of perspective is a frequent device in the Frost canon; see Lentricchia, p. 25.

“cheery” tramps, the “unimportant” wood, the sun, the bluebird, the water, the “right” of love). It does so by juxtaposing these with the need to provide (“don’t forget”) for what is no less real for being less obviously pleasant or present. But note that this is accomplished with our attention directed, not to this one-sidedness of ours, but to the emotional pleasure of act and scene —the implications of *inadequacy* are only “lurking.” Similarly, section two (6–8) brings this pattern to its logical conclusion by sharpening the differences between the pseudo-narrator and the tramps, and by sacrificing one of those “sides,” love and play, to the need to work. Here again our attention is elsewhere, on the prudential over the pleasurable, and again the explicit view is that these elements are *at odds*. Hence, throughout both sections elements are joined only by the disjunctive “but”: “But if you so much as dare to speak”; “But he wouldn’t advise a thing to blossom”; “My right might be love / But theirs was need”; “The sun was warm but the wind was chill.” In sum, careful selection and arrangement of images and actions analogically related to each other and connoting good and bad, the separation of emotion and reason, and various syntactical and stanzaic divisions dichotomize the reader’s perceptions and responses, leading him to see the world as the tramps do—dualistically. This is so successfully accomplished, in fact, that we have to ask ourselves how it is that we come to find the claims about unity in stanza nine persuasive at all. Why not agree with Cowley that stanza nine is a sententious sermon, or with Poirier that the poem is a “failure?” Surely stanza nine alone does not overcome the world-view enacted in the preceding eight: why then accept it?

The answer lies, I think, in the fundamental ambiguity of the poem’s images, actions, terms, and methods of dividing and uniting. Frost does counter each of these with its opposite, but he does so ambiguously, encouraging us in effect to see the elements of each pair not simply as separated, but *also as united*.¹⁷ This means that Frost does not rely in the ninth stanza on abstract sermonizing extraneous to the rest of the poem, as Cowley, Cook and others allege,¹⁸ but simply recommends at the end of the

¹⁷ Consider Frost’s subtle irony in opening the “unifying” ninth stanza with the disjunctive “But,” and in closing the divisive eighth stanza with the conjunctive “agreed.”

¹⁸ My claim here directly challenges Cook, *Dimensions of Robert Frost*, p. 124: “In direct poetry, of which ‘Two Tramps’ is a valid example, the idea is embedded in the

poem what he has been surreptitiously doing all along, uniting opposites.

Consider how this works. Logically stanza eight is compelling in itself—the enthymeme is valid: (Major) Where love and need exist in twain, need is superior. (Minor) Love and need oppose each other here. (Conclusion) Theirs (need) is the better right. Materially, however, emotionally and prudentially, we feel that the argument is incomplete, somehow unacceptable. Having just been admonished in stanza five “not to forget” both sides of life, we intuitively reject its rejection of half of its own dialectical pair. By contrast stanza nine comes as a recognition of something we forgot we knew. Its maxim—that only when love and need, work and play are one is the deed ever *really* done for Heaven and man—unites emotion and reason, pleasure and prudence, and articulates that “lurking” experience of wholeness we only “half-knew” as we read the poem. For while we had been led to see the world diremptively, we were also moved on a deeper level to accept as equally important and valid each neglected side of the various pairs, and that because those sides were only ambiguously unattractive or undesirable.

For example, in stanza eight we “agreed” with the tramps to reject a sentimentalized “love.” Yet at the same time we implicitly allowed for a “love” which was not pleasure simply, but was pleasure *invested with* the dignity of being “for mortal stakes,” inasmuch as the woodchopping with which “play” and “love” were associated was itself not simply pleasure, but a “loosing of the soul,” a vehicle for the expression of deeper values. Similarly, the “frost” we fear in stanza five threatens with its “crystal teeth,” but ambivalently, since teeth of crystal must be, after all, quite delicate, while the image itself in context excites and attracts. Or consider the half-frozen earth in stanza four, which nevertheless promises so much life that a bluebird’s song might “excite” it to bloom, and which (the absent is thus ambiguously present) it must “advise” to wait. So with the cold, the snow, even the common sense of the tramps: we intuitively feel the inadequacy of our own one-sidedness by having to confront what is equally natural, necessary, and attractive a part of scene, sym-

poem like the clingstone in the peach, it is not diffused through it as in oblique or indirect poetry, like salt in the sea.” Cf. Cowley, “The Case Against Mr. Frost: II,” p. 345, and Berkelman, “Robert Frost and the Middle Way,” p. 352.

bol and poem. What we originally avoided we learn we love and need. We enjoy and value the frost as much as we do the water, which, after all—this is the point—it *is*. Hence even “frost / Frost” conflates the narrator with whom we first identify, with the crystal teeth and tramps we fear, replacing this fear (or caution) with the love and need of *both* which the narrator himself espouses and enacts. The “lurking frost” is thus not merely a pun on the author’s name, but a comment on and exemplification of the message and form of the poem itself.

From this perspective we can now grasp the whole poem as an argument whose conclusion is drawn in stanza nine. Past disjunctive pairs can now be understood as so many examples of unity-in-division, related to each other by analogy, which simultaneously, but on different levels of the reader’s awareness, (1) show the powers and limits of the tramps’ view, and more importantly (2) prove by inductive generalization the maxim with which the poem ends. We are persuaded, moved to a new “place,” by virtue of our having experienced several plausible examples, whose terms then become, in Kenneth Burke’s formulation, “equipment for living.” And this explains, I think, why Frost refrains from telling us how he responded to the tramps’ putative request. It is not that this request is insignificant or irrelevant,¹⁹ since this situation is morally as real as any other we might imagine. Rather, Frost has *us* answer our own question by requiring us to apply the message we learned from the poem. And we can only answer that the narrator must give the work because, to put it negatively, *not* to give would be to ignore that “common good” and those “mortal stakes” now before him (and us) in the persons of the needy tramps. To imagine refusing this unity of “self” and “other” in the act of giving is simply to have missed the “message,” to have failed to grasp what the poem enacted. To put this more positively, to give the woodcutting is itself a creative “deed” which unites the narrator’s love and need just as the woodcutting itself had previously done for him. Indeed, the narrator has been giving (by denying himself) for a long time:

The blows that a life of self-control
Spares to strike for the common good . . .

¹⁹ See Kemp, *Frost and New England*, p. 197.

Furthermore, by giving the job Frost in effect concedes that values do often exist "in twain" (the tramps, for one, simply *have no choice* about uniting values such as love and need, work and play); the narrator's giving thus signals the fact that his ideal *realistically* admits the tramps' view, and qualifies it without simply negating it: narrator and tramps are thus unified again in their separation. What Frost has done, then, is to equip us, not with Christian, liberal, or any other kind of determinate doctrine, but with a language and experience requiring innovative thought and feeling, *practical* "wisdom" which completes and finally becomes our "delight."

IV

Lawrence Perrine is right to maintain that "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is about writing.²⁰ It is not *only* about writing—its key terms are purposefully too ambiguous for that—but writing is preeminently one of those "deeds" a poet wants "really" done, by combining (as Frost has combined in this poem) love and need, work and play, vocation and avocation. This fact needs to be stressed, for it means that the poem speaks to Frost's poetic ideal by enacting that ideal within itself.²¹

As for what precisely it means to combine love and need, work and play, avocation and vocation in writing generally, and in Frost's poems in particular, we might mention Robert Berkelman's observation that "One of the most fascinating pairs of opposites in Frost's poetry is . . . Work and Play (otherwise to be identified as the Practical and Poetic). . . ."²² The Practical and Poetic: probably nowhere in the Frost *corpus* is this combination more telling than in "Two Tramps in Mud Time." On the level of content Frost unites the practical tramps and the poetic narrator, the practical woodchopping and the poetic loosing of

²⁰ " 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' and the Critics," p. 674.

²¹ This is an important point critics have overlooked or insufficiently grasped. For example, Nitchie, *Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 155, argues that Frost's "formula" in stanza nine gives "a quite misleading account of what to expect in Frost's poems as a whole," since so few of the poems show "people for whom love and need, vocation and avocation . . . coalesce." This is true enough, but is based on the false supposition that a poem is simply what it talks about (witness Nitchie's own facile reduction of "Two Tramps" to a "formula"), and not the totality of subject matter and its artful embodiment in language.

²² "Robert Frost and the Middle Way," p. 349.

the soul, the practical facts of nature and its poetic (as *sylvan*) scenery, the practical moral of the ninth stanza and the poetic story it generalizes. On the level of form he unites that practical message and the vehicle of the poem itself, until there is finally no telling which is which: is the poem a self-sufficient whole, a well-wrought urn (love and play), or a moralized "editorial" (work and need)? is it vocation or avocation? Or are we not more correct to conclude that the poem as work of art, like the woodchopping, is that "play for mortal stakes" Frost praises—not "art for art's sake," but for "Heaven and the future's sakes?" Abstracted from the playfulness of the poem, it is true, these maxims are banal and sententious. But then to abstract them is just the thing Frost has tried to teach us not to do.

Lawrence Thompson invokes this combination of the practical and poetic, but in terms closer to those that can be of service in reading Frost: "The restrictions which Frost accepts in his theory of poetry save him from the dangers of two extremes: nothing of content (pure art), and nothing except content (pure propaganda)."²³ Applied to poetry itself, then, love and need, work and play signify Frost's ideal of the "philosophic poet" as one who unites knowledge and action in the unity of art and propaganda, poetic and rhetoric. The poet as philosopher is the rhetorician, not in any narrow partisan sense, but as one seeking to stimulate inquiry, to transform commonplaces, and to move to new perceptions of self and world. It is the classical rhetorical ideal of Cicero, Horace and Sidney, for whom the offices of poet, as of orator, were to teach, move and delight. For too long critics have one-sidedly favored the poetic against the rhetorical, and the romantic "I" against the more pragmatic "we," and in consequence have failed to do justice to one of Frost's most representative poems. It is not unlikely that more rhetorical analyses can enrich our sense of Frost as communicator, and of his work as play for mortal stakes. We have not yet found the lurking Frost.

²³ *Fire and Ice*, p. 20.

The Resentments of Robert Frost

Frank Lentricchia

By 1919 Louis Untermeyer—Robert Frost's most assiduously cultivated (if unwitting) literary operative—could declare in the opening sentence to the first edition of his soon-to-be influential anthology, *Modern American Poetry*, that “‘America’s poetic renascence’” was more than just a bandied and self-congratulatory phrase of advanced literary culture: “it is a fact.”¹ And on the basis of that fact or wish (it hardly matters which) Untermeyer and Harcourt Brace made what turned out to be a lucrative wager on the poetry market through seven editions of the anthology, the latter of which entered the university curriculum and stayed there through the 1940s and 50s, bearing to more than one generation of faculty and students the news of the poetry of modernism and at the same time establishing well into the 60s a list of modernist musts: Frost foremost, together with strong representations of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Williams, Hart Crane, and a long list of more briefly represented—and now mostly forgotten—poets. What Untermeyer had succeeded in presenting in his later editions, against his own literary and social values, was a stylistic texture of modern American poetry so mixed as to defy the force of canonical directive. If the poetry of modernism could include Frost, Stevens, Pound, Marianne Moore, and Langston Hughes, then maybe the phenomenon of modernism embraced a diversity of intentions too heterogeneous to satisfy the tidy needs of historical definition.

But the first edition of Untermeyer's book offered no such collage-like portrait of the emerging scene of modern American poetry: No Eliot, Stevens, or Williams, only a token of Pound and the avant-gardists. Untermeyer's anthology of 1919 was in fact heavily studded with names that had appeared a few years

¹ *Modern American Poetry: An Introduction*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1919), p. vii.

earlier in the anthology of his chief genteel competitor, Jessie Belle Rittenhouse's *Little Book of Modern Verse* (1912)—including the name of Rittenhouse herself. The economic interests of Untermeyer and his publisher, as Untermeyer would acknowledge years later, ensured that his declaration of the new be accompanied not by an avant-garde act of rupture but by a conciliating act that veiled his differences with the popular taste that Rittenhouse, then in her second edition, had so well played to.² The first edition of Rittenhouse's anthology had sold over a hundred-thousand copies, a fact never apparently lost on Untermeyer who through all of his editions managed to include poems that Rittenhouse would have admired and which, through no stretch of imagination, would be included under anybody's definition of modernism.

Rittenhouse, a major literary journalist in the American scene in the first two decades of this century,³ published in 1904 what must have been the first book to attempt a characterization of *modern American poetry* (*The Younger American Poets*), though not one writer she took up has survived in recent accounts of American literary history (not even for a sentence). She made it her business to get to know the literary powers of the day in New York and Boston, interviewing many of them for major northeast dailies; became chief poetry reviewer for the *New York Times*; and a founder in 1910 of the Poetry Society of America. In her various writings and anthologies she could say who was in and who (usually by omission) was out, and though recent historians have not ratified any of her choices and do not know her name, she was a force who represented both in her female person and her taste the aesthetic grain that the emerging modernist male poets worked against: the principle of "the Feminine in literature," as Eliot⁴ put it, which he was none too anxious to give space to in *The Egoist*; the "Aunt Hepsy" that Pound⁵ saw as typifying poetry's contemporary audience in the United

² *From Another World: The Autobiography of Louis Untermeyer* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939), pp. 327-32.

³ For the relevant information see Margaret Widdeemer, *Jessie Rittenhouse: A Centenary Memoir-Anthology* (South Brunswick, N. J., and New York: A. S. Banner, 1969).

⁴ *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 1, 1898-1922, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 204.

⁵ *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 17.

States; one of those—again Pound—who had turned poetry (for serious people) into “balderdash—a sort of embroidery for dilettantes and women.”⁶

Like E. C. Stedman’s *An American Anthology* (1900) and Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1867), in its several editions a best-seller in America, Rittenhouse’s *Little Book of Modern Verse* sustained an innocent lyric ideal of sweetness, the voice of unadulterated song. Nothing in her anthology contradicted the literary principles announced by Palgrave and Stedman in their respective prefaces, where they characterized lyric by what they excluded. No narrative, no description of local, regional cast; no humor (the antithesis of the lyric mode, according to Palgrave); no intellect at meditation; nothing occasional; nothing dramatic—no textures of blank verse because lyric in its purity excludes the dramatic voice in its speaking cadences; certainly no vernacular. Eliot would say that a real poet could amalgamate his experiences of falling in love and reading Spinoza because a real poet’s sensibility was not dissociated; a real poet did not shrink from the impurities of heterogeneous experience.⁷ Palgrave, Stedman, and Rittenhouse were champions of the dissociated lyric of exclusion, the homogeneity of the isolate, autonomous, unmixed feeling (no ironists allowed), and their books sanctioned and sustained that lyric ideal through the young manhoods of the modernists-to-be who would in some large part learn how to write a “modern” poetry by writing against “poetry” as it was underwritten by these major tastemakers and the mass circulation magazines which gave space to genteel lyric and precious little else.

Stedman summed up genteel America’s poetic ideal most provocatively when, in an I-told-you-so aside, he noted that the Civil War had motivated no “little classics of absolute song.”⁸ Democratic cultures, as we know, are not supposed to venerate heroic ideals, the big epic literary classic is presumably beyond our reach—which leaves us with the little or lyric classic, but even that is imperilled by the forces of social environment, the

⁶ Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909–1965*, ed. with an introduction by William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 41.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 247.

⁸ *An American Anthology, 1787–1900*, ed. E. C. Stedman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. xxxi.

penetration of lyric interiority by temporal immediacy. The unhappy result, in the embedded logic of Stedman's lament, is the birth of the impure or "partial" song, song not quite emptied of worldly interests and pressures—lyric too much with the world. Joyce Kilmer thought Rittenhouse had "raised anthology-making to a fine art."⁹ Frost thought otherwise. He told one correspondent that her title was "silly."¹⁰ He didn't explain what he meant, but he must have meant that she had no right to the word "modern," and, of course, by the governing aesthetic dicta of genteel anthology-making, she didn't. In the world of Palgrave and Stedman "modern lyric" is a contradiction in terms, not to mention a besmirching of the category of lyric. Lyric practice by male and female writers seemed to Pound and Frost an effeminate business, and cultural authority in the female person of Jessie Belle must have made it seem doubly so.

Aside from needing to make a buck, Untermeyer needed to make a point or two. If he was at veiled war with Rittenhouse and genteel culture, then he was at open polemics with Conrad Aiken over whose version of the new poetry would achieve cultural authority, which new poets would survive. For Untermeyer the modern moment was peculiarly American, its progenitors his benign versions of Whitman and Dickinson, its vision hopeful and democratic, its formal manner always submissive to its human content: art with positive social function. The decadence of Stevens, the assiduous internationalism of Pound, the tenuous inwardness of Eliot, all represented an unhealthy foreign strain, an elitist art-for-art's-sake plying of the craft for a coterie audience: undemocratic to the core, Untermeyer believed, because an art that only the culturally privileged could make any sense of.¹¹ *Modern American Poetry* was aimed at a mass audience for economic reasons, but its democratic ideology also demanded a mass audience, and as a perfectly blended capitalist/populist venture, Untermeyer's book stood against the coterie anthologies only recently put out by the New York avant-garde, by Pound, and by Wyndham Lewis (*Others*, *The Catholic Anthology*, *Blast*).

⁹ Quoted in Widdemer, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 174.

¹¹ Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1919), pp. 206, 209–10, 317.

So upon the economic success of *Modern American Poetry* hung Untermeyer's version of the future of the new poetry, his desire for a poetry rooted in diverse American cultures, and his hopes for the reading and dissemination of poetry in a democratic society. Upon the economic success of Untermeyer's anthology hung the cultural authority of the party of Van Wyck Brooks's nativist intellectuals, the cultural politics of "America's coming-of-age" of which *Modern American Poetry* was the anthological representative.

Untermeyer went polemically further in his companion critical volume, *The New Era in American Poetry* (also published in 1919), in which he characterized the work of Pound, Stevens, and their aesthetic companions published by Walter Arensberg's *Others* as "mere verbal legerdemain," effeminate and morbid.¹² Aiken, Eliot's college mate and long time correspondent, counterattacked in a review of the book in the *New Republic* with the charge that Untermeyer's celebration in American poetry of "the unflinchingly masculine" (which he glossed with the words "Americanism" and "lustihood") was unwittingly a celebration of the most conservative of poetic and political values.¹³ Poetry with the right message—the carefully monitored poetry of the ideal state, good for the education of soldiers—had been welcomed by Plato, after all, poetry's most celebrated historical enemy. Aiken argued that Untermeyer's soft socialist politics, grafted onto a happy version of Whitman, blinded him to the force of the true revolutionaries who were "throwing their bombs into the aesthetic arena": Not Frost, Sandburg, Masters, Robinson, and Lindsay (those low modernists who dominated the first edition of *Modern American Poetry*), but the formal innovators, the high modernists of "absolute poetry" to whom Untermeyer had given such short shrift.¹⁴ Untermeyer never managed to, or could, say why the stance of virility or the politics of social democracy required poetic representation, or what difference it could make to virility or democracy that they be imagined in an aesthetic rather than in some other medium. Aiken, on the other hand, who declared himself on the side of literary ex-

¹² See Conrad Aiken, "The Ivory Tower—I"; Louis Untermeyer, "The Ivory Tower —II," *New Republic*, 10 May 1919, pp. 58–61.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

perimentation as the agency of art-for-art's-sake, never managed to, or could, say what connection obtained, if any, between literary and social experimentation, or why he should be taken seriously when he described the literary avant-gardist as a bomb-throwing radical. What surfaces in this early argument within modernism is one of the most ancient topics in literary theory, that of the relationship of art and the commonweal, here, in the Aiken-Untermeyer clash, given what would become its definitive framing in the critical literature of modernism, where aesthetics and politics are typically forced by rhetorical heat to stand in opposition even as that same rhetoric of modernist polemic causes them suspiciously (because protesting too much) to lean toward one another, as if revolution in poetry and social change could not be imagined outside a relation of strong interdependence.

But if, in Aiken's view, Untermeyer's introduction to *Modern American Poetry* seemed in its immediate polemical context to cherish too chauvinistically the peculiarly American possibilities for poetic renascence and too eager to court insulation from European traditions; if Untermeyer appeared to be replaying Emerson's call in "The American Scholar" for an American literature free from servility to British aesthetic rule, rooted in the American common places, and therefore worthy of the American social experiment, then on Untermeyer's behalf it ought to be remembered that his distinguishing heritage was not Emersonian New England but German-Jewish immigrant stock and that his revision of Emerson's ideas on the relations of literary expression to their cultural matrix was worked out at the high tide of our heaviest period of immigration. What Untermeyer needed to see in the new poetry was aesthetic responsiveness to voices that were never heard at the cosmopolitan finishing schools of genteel America, voices which were virtually unrepresented in poetic traditions before Wordsworth because they were unworthy of the memorialization provided by traditional producers of literature, whose typical objects of representation were people like themselves, with privileged routes to the acquisition of literacy. Alongside genteel authors Untermeyer published a black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, several Jews, a Philadelphia Irish-American journalist, T. A. Daly, whose specialty was Italian-American dialect, and numerous poets from outside the Northeast corner of the United States. In his critical book he de-

voted an entire chapter to the Italian immigrant socialist admirer of Whitman, Arturo Giovannitti: America was changing and as an untraditional literary voice himself, Untermeyer, the literary historian as anthologist, found himself in the sensitive political position to disseminate his vision of an America in which poetry emerged not from one or two culturally elite centers but from everywhere; a poetry which, in refusing legendary, traditional, and classical poetic materials, and their generally economically advantaged authors, in choosing its *materia poetica* from everywhere but the traditional sources, was in effect fashioning itself as a revolutionary literature standing against what literature had been. From the traditional perspective, the new poetry was an antipoetic poetry that even the "conservative *New York Times*,"¹⁵ as Untermeyer put it, had to acknowledge had dislodged poetic traditions in this country in favor of a writing that insisted on prosaic everydayness, not only as subject but as its very medium of expression: a poetry which in following the lead of Howells, Twain, and the new novel would spell the death of genteel aesthetic ideals and at the same time signal a larger death, that of genteel America's cultural and political authority.

Although Untermeyer probably tuned into much of this American cultural and social change on his own—he was a keen observer of the literary scene—his sensibility was nevertheless being shrewdly nurtured and directed by his correspondence with Robert Frost, his favorite poet of the new school, who by the time he returned home from England in 1915 had set himself against Pound and the self-conscious avant-garde and was fully engaged in the entrepreneurial process of staging his own image as a different, an American kind of modernist. The Frostian directives that got into both Untermeyer's anthology and the critical volume of 1919 must have sounded to Aiken like Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* re-visited, an effort to finish off a poetic revolution that had got sidetracked by Tennysonian aestheticism and the various moods of the 1890s. What Untermeyer thought he saw emerging in American poetry—the discarding of a "stilted" (he meant a rare, rhetorical, ornate, *writerly*) vocabulary in favor of what he called a sincere,

¹⁵ *Modern American Poetry*, p. viii.

simple “daily vocabulary” (a vocal language of everyday situation)—appears to overcome the very mediation of print itself, so that we can virtually hear the speaker on the printed page. All of it amounted to the creation of a literature whose most powerful effect lay in the illusion it created of its unliterariness, in its refusal to borrow its verbal modes and tics from official poetic history, from poetry with a capital letter under the imprimatur of Francis Palgrave.¹⁶ Modern American poetry, Untermeyer thought, would be recognizable by its unliterary (vernacular) borrowing directly from life itself: Like Frost and the realists he meant by “life” the lives of the historically unsung—therein lay the radical, the “modern,” and the “American” character of “modern American poetry.” But what this account of the new poetry left out (this, perhaps, is the root of Aiken’s impatience with Untermeyer’s downplaying of the aesthetic dimension) is that such radicality is mainly perceptible only to those with keen awareness of the history of English poetry, because only those (not the unlettered man celebrated by Untermeyer’s Whitmanesque ideal) are in a position to grasp basic shifts in literary history; to grasp not a change from “literariness” to “life-likeness” but a change from established kinds of literariness, and the social bases that supported such writing, to a new kind of literariness, presumably an organic expression of a new kind of social arrangement: Literary change, in so many words, as index of social change and proleptic glimpse and push in the direction American society might be heading. The historically startling idea that social change might be reflected in and directed by lyric poetry, of all things, as well as in the grungy bourgeois forms of prose fiction, where accounts of social conflict are to be expected—in a novelized poetry which (Untermeyer’s words) “explores the borderland of poetry and prose”¹⁷ and thereby, at that generic crossing, explores fundamental social differences: this was perhaps the most deeply buried issue of the relation of aesthetics and politics that lay unexamined between Untermeyer and Aiken, Frost’s line of the modern and Pound’s.

In his battle with inherited poetic diction, Frost believed that in *North of Boston* he had scored a decisive victory in literary

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. viii–ix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

history because there he had “dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above”; there, in *North of Boston*, he had performed “in a language absolutely unliterary,” and had barred from his writing all “words and expressions he had merely *seen*” (in books) and had not “*heard* used in running speech.”¹⁸ “Words that are the product of another poet’s imagination,” as he declared in his strongest avant-garde moment, “cannot be passed off again. . . . All this using of poetic diction is wrong.”¹⁹ This, he explained, was the essence of his “war on clichés,” which he later described as a war on all structure, systems, and system-building.²⁰ But he didn’t want to be misunderstood, as he believed Pound had misunderstood him, as “a spontaneous untutored child” because he was not “undesigning.”²¹ What Frost’s design amounted to was an antinomian intention to undo all design (all intention, all structure) in its institutional incarnation and sanction. “What I suspect we hate,” he wrote in 1937, “is canons, which are no better than my guidances insisted on as your guidances.”²² For canons are on the side of stabilization and tradition, and would give the rule of the dead over the living, once and for all. But literature, Frost thought, is the very spirit of insubordination, as such the anticanonical principle verbally incarnate. If nothing is “momentous,” if “nothing is final,” then, he concluded, literary canons and the critical generalizations which produce and sustain them are instruments of literary repression wielded by professors in Frost’s constant institutional target of literary repression, the university or college.²³

The logic of Frost’s poetics equates literary insubordination with literature itself, and literature with modern literature, not as some specific historical style evolved in the early twentieth century but as something like the very spirit of literature finding its fullest incarnation in an American scene which provided its true (because democratic) political directive: No literature except

¹⁸ *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, pp. 84, 102.

¹⁹ Louis Untermeyer, *Interviews with Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 26.

²⁰ *Selected Letters*, p. 343.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 444.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 181, 191, 234.

in radically individualized expression. In his arguments on behalf of the vernacular as an intoned and intransigent locality, the basis of a vital and living literary voice, "entangled somehow in the syntax, idiom and meaning of a sentence," Frost named the multiheaded enemy of literary insubordination—that is to say the enemy of *literature*—as the professorial sentence, the dead, grammatical discourse taught at school; the poets of classical tradition, fawned over by professors who teach them as literary models but whose sentences in living speech are not accessible to us; and the reiterated poeticisms of English tradition preserved and sustained by contemporary genteel anthologists like Stedman and Rittenhouse: all those enemies of a living (i.e., a "contemporary," a genuinely "modern") literature who come at us from the feminized crypt of manliness, the book.²⁴

"Words," Frost said in a striking proverbial moment, "exist in the mouth," their masculine origin; "not in books," their effeminate emasculation.²⁵ He told his son Carol, in a startling letter of sexual-poetic self-evocation, that Carol had written "No sissy poem such as I get from poetic boys. . . ." (And note "poetic boys": the provocatively gendered responses of Frost, Pound, and other male modernists were to a literary style, a cultural feminization, at work in the writing of both sexes.) It seems that Carol (who with a name like that maybe needed to hear this) had managed to "ram" his writing "full of all sorts of things"; the poem he sent his father had been "written with a man's vigor and goes down into a man's depth."²⁶ The mark of Frost's own manliness lay (this a frequent boast in his letters) in the success he had in breaking through the genteel lyric, as if through a cultural chastity belt, a vernacular desert from which Stedman and other genteel cultural critics had outlawed the conversational voice. And it lay in his success in "bringing to book" tones never heard before in poetry.²⁷ Frost's sexual self-image as a writer would define him simultaneously as phallic inseminator (vigorous rammer which no sissy, feminized male was capable of becoming) and radical female creator ("bringing to book" was his literary turn on "bringing to bed" with child),

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–08, 140, 159, 181, 191, 234.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

all for the purpose of penetrating down—now the homoerotic image—into a man's depth.

Frost's ideal audience would not be composed of the Aunt Hepsies contemptuously alluded to by Pound as the real material base of reception for genteel lyric. His ideal audience would be no feminized audience in need of feeling his "prowess" (a favorite term with Frost, describing his feats of literary "performance"); it would be, rather, a skeptical and even scoffing masculinized audience whose American cultural formation had made it resistant to poetic reception, but which might receive him in its depth if his was the verse of a writer who is all man and whose poetry does not present itself under the conventional genteel signs of poetry.²⁸ Often a sneering coded term in the critical reflections of the emerging poets of modernism, American "poetry" at the turn of the century constantly flies and flees into the circumambient gases, as one of the gurus of modernism, T. E. Hulme, put it in scornful dismissal of nineteenth-century soft lyric ideals.²⁹ Poetry, Hulme argued, must become instead "hard" and "dry."³⁰ It must cease being "the great passive vulva," as Hulme's intellectual brother Ezra Pound would write of the London literary scene at the turn of the century.³¹ A real man's poetry would not be shamed by confrontation with the real if, as Frost insisted against various nineteenth-century idealist rhetorics of lyricism, he did not "create" but "summoned" voices from the quotidian in all their particularity.³² The act of summoning voices from the vernacular would be the sign of masculinity in poetry, an invitation to poetic reading that real (economically earnest) men might find seductive because redolent with the odors of a world they knew and the new lyric poet's key technical liaison with the already powerfully emerged realist novel that might win for him, an American male lyricist, social acceptance in an American capitalist context which typically encoded economic and cultural roles in engendered opposition.

So Frost's struggle against canonical forces was a struggle carried out on behalf of a new lyric diction and therefore new

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

²⁹ *Speculations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1924), p. 120.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³¹ *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 204.

³² *Selected Letters*, p. 80.

(and low) lyric social materials (below even Wordsworth), for the purpose of re-engendering lyric for “masculinity,” a word in Frost’s and other poetic modernists’ lexicons signifying not a literal opening of the lyric to actual male voices and subjects, but a symbolic shattering of a constrictive lyric decorum that had the effect, in Frost’s America, of denigrating poetry as the province of leisured women in their land of cultural irrelevance. (Frost’s experiments in fact often featured at their very center economically disadvantaged female voices.) Unlike the old lyric, the modern lyric (like modern America itself) would be (should be) indecorously open (“full of all sorts of things”); the old lyric, which Frost talked about as if it were coextensive with poetry itself and what it had been, “left to its own tendencies” “would exclude everything but love and the moon” in its decorously pure, homogeneous texture.³³ Frost’s struggle against the traditional author and the traditional lyric was simultaneously a struggle against both social and literary exclusion. The new lyric would be “modern” because it would implicitly stand as a political rebuke to traditional literature: revolutionary because heterogeneous in form, style, diction, subject, social origin, and social reference. In Untermeyer’s and Frost’s America, the new manly lyric would be an expressive medium of the collage of cultures America was fast becoming, the literary resistance to the cultural melting pot, a genuinely American creation, true to the radical spirit of the American social experiment.

Frost made his points in letters, not in essays, but because his thought made an appearance in Untermeyer’s critical prose and as the hidden genius of his anthology, it made its historical impact. Concurrent with Frost’s gendered, socially expansive and novelized efforts to rethink and rewrite lyric, Pound and Eliot pursued parallel efforts to open up the lyric, but in more public ways, in essays of immediate critical impact which eventually gave rise to a codified theory of poetry, the critical representation of modernity that came to be known as the New Criticism. In one of its most elegant expressions, Robert Penn Warren in “Pure and Impure Poetry” (1943) provides at once a focus for the issues of the emerging new lyric around 1912 and the ironic

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

costs of the institutional prestige it had achieved by the late 1940s when Warren, Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate had secured the domination of T. S. Eliot's poetics and criticism.

Like Frost, and in a gesture typical of the drastically narrowed idea of poetic types that had taken hold early in the nineteenth century, Warren—following Poe's pronouncement that a long poem is a contradiction in terms—identifies poetry with the singular subjective intensity of the short lyric and its tendency to exclude everything but feeling anchored in nothing but its own self-regard. In a key allegorical moment of alliance with the very aesthetic ideals that he would critically revise, Warren says "Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not."³⁴ The impurity that lyric would exclude—and that Warren would put back into poems—turns out to be coextensive with the world of "prose and imperfection," by which Warren means the everyday world represented in realist fiction—"unbeautiful, disagreeable, or neutral materials," "situation, narrative," "realistic details, exact description, realism in general."³⁵ Warren's list of excluded impurities is notable for its aesthetic conservatism. He doesn't really disagree with Poe that there is such a thing as poetic decorum: because if there are such things as inherently unbeautiful or disagreeable materials, then there must be an inherently beautiful object toward which "poetry" might properly yearn. And his list is notable as well for its interesting confusion of realms, with some elements in the list referring to things in the world that "poetry" (to its detriment) doesn't wish to take account of and other elements referring to the realist literary medium of their representation. The oddity of Warren's effort to liberate poets from the strait-jacketing decorum of "poetry" is that it must grant the genteel aesthete's point—that there is a realm of the beautiful which is poetry's proper object—precisely in order to establish the identity of the "poem," whose character would lie in its act of avoiding "poetry." Strong mixtures of subject, diction, tone, and allusion are the trademarks of the tough-minded modernist poem that Warren and other

³⁴ "Pure and Impure Poetry," in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert W. Stallman (New York: Ronald, 1949), p. 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 87, 99.

New Critics admired in Eliot and which they theorized in their essays as signs of highest literary value. But these signs of the new poetics bear a haunted, historical quality—an uneasy consciousness (ironic, nostalgic, sometimes both at once) of the way things used to be, of what can no longer be written but which is nevertheless often evoked in gestures of modernist farewell.

Like Frost's, Warren's account of traditional lyric (via romantic aesthetics) would appear to identify lyric substance with unsituated feelings of love, a subjectivity whose object knows no history. Poe's beautiful dead woman would be something like the logical object and fulfillment of this aesthetic and affective drive, the essence of lyric idealism, not its deviation. Frost calls the traditional lyric object "love and the moon"; Warren's examples of lyric are almost all drawn from the literature of love. So Frost and Warren pursue, because they understand, the issue of lyric purity in its late nineteenth-century embattled generic context in which the contemporary genteel lyric was being pushed gleefully into the grave by the novel and the polemical defenders of realism. They implicitly define the modernist moment for poetry as the moment of realist pressure upon the lyric; both, but Warren more than Frost, hypostasize a lyric impulse drained of historical specificity in direct proportion to their sensitivity to the generic dominance of a kind of writing (realist fiction) whose central claim to cultural value was its historical density. The struggle for literary liberation in the early modern moment of American poetry was directed against genteel idealism and its Victorian and Romantic sources, but the seductive pull of that idealism in the embryonic moments of modernist literary culture turned out to be greater, more insidious, more invasive than might appear at face value in modernist polemic and manifesto.

Frost's effort to destroy what Poe, Tennyson, and Swinburne had wrought (and Palgrave, Stedman, and Rittenhouse had institutionalized) by dramatically adapting the rhythms and aural qualities of the traditional lyric to the cacophonous, speaking rhythms of voices in worldly situations is an effort to come to terms with the novel, as is his theory that everything "written is as good as it is dramatic—even the most unassuming lyric," which must be heard as "spoken by a person in a scene—in

character, in a setting.”³⁶ His desire to be known as a poet who had summoned (not created) tones and rhythms from actual speech is as good a sign as we have of how far down in prestige traditional notions of “poetry” had sunk in the rankings of the literary genres by the early twentieth century. If in middle-class societies the novel had displaced the epic of traditional culture, and if classic forms of drama were increasingly being “replaced” (Pound’s acidic reflection) by more popular and economically feasible forms of theater, then what role could possibly be imagined for the lyric?³⁷ Only half kiddingly Wallace Stevens asked Elsie Moll to keep it a secret that he was, some ten years after his Harvard experiments in decadence, returning to the making of verses, a habit he described as “positively lady-like.”³⁸ In a letter of 2 May 1913 Frost expressed similar male discomfort when he remarked on the ease with which English men, as opposed to their pragmatic American counterparts, could attend to their aesthetic inclinations without sparking a scandal of gender-decorum violated: “I like that about the English—they all have time to dig in the ground for the nonutilitarian flower. I mean the men. It marks the great difference between them and our men.” In the same letter Frost goes on to nominate himself the rare exception among American males—a digger of the wild flower, like a man he knew who “was a byword in five townships for the flowers he tended with his own hand” (pansy!). With sardonic joy he links his cultivation of the poetic with that same nonutilitarian and—this is the American cultural logic—unmanly pursuit (“I have certain useless accomplishments to my credit”).³⁹ So when twenty years later he praises his son for the manliness of his poetic style and adds that “You perhaps don’t realize what this means to me,”⁴⁰ he is reflecting in the precisest terms possible the crisis in the genteel lyric that such as he, Pound, Eliot, and others had precipitated when they de-

³⁶ *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and E. C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 13.

³⁷ See Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”: “The pianola ‘replaces’ / Sappho’s barbitos.”

³⁸ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 180.

³⁹ *Selected Letters*, pp. 71–72.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

cided (after, in Frost's and Pound's cases, brief flirtations with the novel) to devote their literary energies to producing a new (manly) lyric mode.

This issue of manliness is the historical thread binding Frost and Warren's New Criticism and an index to the difference between the historical situation of the new lyric at its emergence point and the historical situation of its triumphs of the 1920s and 30s, when it was difficult to see it anymore as new writing in struggle against official forms of literariness, when, in fact, by the early 40s, when Warren's essay appeared, the new lyric's open ("impure") and heterogeneous character was fast becoming no longer perceptible as an historically specific discourse because it had been thoroughly institutionalized as the way poems always had been at their best. Brooks's landmark of 1942, *The Well Wrought Urn*, in effect so canonized the modernist lyric by carefully explicating what he offered as examples of poetic discourse from all the literary periods; by projecting the modernist moment backward in time (*Modern Poetry and the Tradition* [1939] is the title of his first critical book) Brooks, in patient elaboration of the argument Eliot had tossed off in a few sentences in the essay "The Metaphysical Poets," thought he had found a poetics good for all time. Warren for his part had inveighed in his essay against locating the poetic in some specific subject which then becomes the sign of poetic essence here and everywhere and forever (love and the moon), but he ended by reifying, like his co-author Brooks, the heterogeneous lyric (contra all canons of decorum, presumably) as itself a poetic essence, the standard of a new ("modernist") literary decorum no less constraining than the old decorum enforced by Palgrave, Stedman, and Rittenhouse. And no less canonical in its effect, as the revolt of the Beats and various poets of the 60s in so many words testifies.

If love is lyric poetry's purest inherent tendency—in Warren's terms, lyric's "soft" subject, and the exclusionary principle par excellence—then the principle of impurity is embodied, in Warren's most resonant example, by Mercutio, the spirit of hard masculine wit who brings love back from the far empyrean to bawdy earth.⁴¹ Mercutio, in lines cited by Warren, by carrying

⁴¹ Warren, pp. 87, 90.

the news of the unrequited phallic urge to Romeo and Juliet becomes the representation of the principle of impurity who transforms "poetry" into a *complex, ironic*, and (key new critical word) *mature* "poem." In terms closer to the effete literary culture that the American modern poets would have understood because they grew up in it: the genteel yearning for a de-sexualized Keats—a superb blue moth as Stedman would have him, the genteel representation of the poetic itself, free from the Victorian scandal of the Fanny Brawne letters—this fairy-like Keats must be surrounded by an unidealized consciousness that so far from doing in and doing away with the purity of "poetry" actually acts as its world-toughened shield, the realist protector of airy romantic ideality, "poetry" safely tucked away inside the "poem"—Keats made safe for modernist tough guys. No poet dare not make his peace with Mercutio who, if he is not invited inside, will do his bawdy debunking work destructively from without, relegating "poetry" for the males who take it up to the self-embarrassed sphere of the lady-like (Stevens), the work of sissy boys (Frost), and to societies of leisured ladies who have nothing better to do, having left business and politics to their men, as Pound once roughly put it in allusion to Jessie Belle Rittenhouse.

So the lyric is culturally sanctioned in modernist polemic when what is culturally branded (and denigrated) as essentially female is not done away with but is married to the male principle: such marriage is the mark, for Warren, of heterogeneous or impure lyric *tout court* and not only of the historically circumscribed modernist lyric which is lyric's most recent incarnation. In context, however, the issue of poetic manliness in the first decade of the twentieth century in the United States was not just another chapter in an historical battle of genders and genres, and not just another testament of patriarchal authority asserted (though Warren's essay is open to this last charge). For Frost and other young poetic modernists, manliness was quite simply the culturally excluded principle in a life given to poetry that made it difficult for the modern American male to enter the literary life with a clean conscience. In the young Frost's case the prospect of a literary life in poetry could raise only the most bitter of issues. For his assumption of the culturally imposed, feminine lyric posture as seeker of the beautiful not

only cut against the authoritative and rapacious male models of vocation that culture in the Gilded Age offered him, as ironic gifts of social acceptance; it also cut severely against the actual lives of the females closest to him: his mother and his wife, neither of whom was blessed with the role of privileged-class woman upon whom ideals of cultural feminization in America are typically based. Neither Frost's mother nor his wife could qualify in the technical sense as working-class, but both were tied to toiling joylessly and without hope of respite in jobs of no glamour and to lifetime grooves of family obligation that permitted no life in high cultural activity for themselves; no life certainly in the leisured class work of cultural promulgation and the taming of the materially driven spirit of men in the values of religion, poetry, and domestic commitment; no life, in other words, in the cultural work enshrined in America's sentimental nineteenth-century feminine tradition.

The accolade of manliness that Frost gave to his son and his desire to get rid of poetic diction altogether are the related acts of insubordination and resentment of an economically marginal American college dropout who enjoyed none of the social privileges of the great English poets he admired, and whose class formation permitted him not even the easy pleasures of idealizing the life of his women folk, for the women he knew best knew only the hardest of times. For Frost the fashioning of a new lyric mode was an opening to all that his social identity had declared out of bounds. The cultural issue of manliness had for him immediate, personal impact: it was what structured his relationship to his family, to himself as a male, and to literary history. It was not, as it would become for the institutionally powerful practice that Warren helped to initiate, a symbolic issue concerning associated sensibilities and the course of English literary history in the seventeenth century.

In his earliest efforts to open lyric by rejecting the heritage of official lyric diction preserved and passed on to his generation of poets by his anglophilic genteel culture, Frost in effect predicted the shape that his literary career would take. It was to be a career committed to nativist values. The struggle of any young American poet who would be an original, he often argued, must be against those custodians of culture who betray the American

scene by directing him to write in a banalized, special language found only in books (and English books at that), a language with no sources in the “cave” of the “mouth,” a language that “everybody exclaims Poetry! at.”⁴² The American sounds and rhythms in running speech would constitute Frost’s new-found virgin land, the uncanonized territory that gave him refuge of aesthetic freedom because he could refuse, as “no one horse American poet” after Keats could refuse, the mimetic idolatry of Keat’s yearning romantic diction. Frost offered the endlessly echoed word “alien” from the *Nightingale* poem as the exemplary piece of ironic evidence of American self-alienation, a de-naturing of the American thing by poets who could not help indenturing themselves to Keats, and a continuing display of aesthetic servitude to British rule that Emerson and many others had lamented in the 1820s and 1830s in their call for literary emancipation.⁴³

The generally conservative lyric practice of Frost’s first volume, *A Boy’s Will* (1913), was followed by the dramatic and narrative experiments in the blending of dialogue, storytelling, and a vocality “lower” than Wordsworth’s, in his second volume, *North of Boston* (1914), which was in turn followed by his final major transformation into the sententious poet of public fame who comes to dominate most of what he writes after the publication of his third volume, *Mountain Interval* (1916). These neat divisions of Frost’s career tell the familiar modern American tale of youthful genius emancipated from convention only to be seduced by capital and heavy media attention. But in this case it is a story which partially misrepresents because it segregates what at Frost’s most original was the fusion from early on, in a single literary impulse, of lyrical, narrative, dramatic, and didactic moods. (In fact, all of *North of Boston* and some of *Mountain Interval* were written in the long apprenticeship preceding the publication of *A Boy’s Will*.) His most radical moment as a new lyric poet is discernible not in the dramatic and narrative successes of *North of Boston* (“Mending Wall,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” “A Servant to Servants”), but in the deceptive poems of *A Boy’s Will* where in a context of tame, historically recognizable lyric practice, which won him (before he travelled

⁴² *Selected Letters*, pp. 191, 141.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

to England) some acceptances in mass circulation magazines, we come across "Mowing," a poem in which he thought he had gotten so close to getting down everything he wanted to get down, that he despaired of ever matching that effort again:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound—
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

Beginning with his title Frost plunges us into a poetry of work interrupted and obligation briefly stayed ("But I have promises to keep / And miles to go before I sleep"), aesthetic satisfaction wrested from a context of labor which is at once the antagonist of the aesthetic moment and the trigger of its gratification. Labor: the grudging basis for poetry for those who have no traditional means of economic and cultural support for the writing of lyric—those whose lyricism, like Frost's, had better somehow be supported by *and in* the very course of the actual tasks of daily work because there is no alternative system of literary support available; those who somehow must be simultaneously poets and laborers. Frost's penchant for titles which feature the present participle promotes the biographically telling fiction that his is a writing coincidental with the actual processes of work it describes ("Mowing," "Going for Water," "Mending Wall," "After Apple Picking," "Putting in the Seed"). These poems obliquely focus the biography of a writer who from his childhood was required by circumstances to work: between eight and eighteen as newspaper carrier, waiter, gate keeper at a mill, farmhand, and more than once, as assembly-line worker—first at twelve years old in a shoe factory, the second time at a woolen mill, at seventeen, for sixty-three hours a week.

Wordsworth often composed in his head, wandering at his leisure in the Lake District, and Stevens did likewise, walking purposively through the districts of Hartford, Connecticut, to his executive desk at the insurance company. Frost's most intriguing poems imply a different fiction about their author's social origins: that he did it *as* he worked, that their written forms are unnecessary—the gratuitous recordings of an act, antecedent to writing, of labor aesthetically intersected for a laborer who may never actually write, either because he will have no time for it or because he will have no skill to do so. The implicit poetics of Frost's lyric poetry of work makes the statement that this is a kind of writing which claims nothing special for its being written, or for the values of writing as such: an anti-poetics of work for those who may never have heard of poetics, or read a poet; a highly literate poetry, nevertheless, that needed, in sly guilt, to efface itself as literature—as if poetry were a high-falutin indulgence, yet for some reason necessary—and in such effacement give us access to life in the here and now; access, in other words, to “modernity.”

Unlike Wordsworth's “The Solitary Reaper,” upon which Frost's “Mowing” mounts a critique empowered not a little out of resentment, there is no separation in Frost's poem of poetic and laboring voices. Wordsworth, a third-person observer, coolly notes “yon” Highland lass, reaping and singing. His poem's key rhetorical directives (“Behold her . . . Stop here or gently pass!”) tell us that his physical distance from the reaper is an aid to the distance required for imaginative reflection. And distance, physical and contemplative, is in turn a figure for the class difference, hierarchy, and privilege which define Wordsworth's relation to the working presence named in his title. These social distances produce the very possibility of this poem and also this, its pivotal question: “Will no one tell me what she sings?” Frost, a first-person participant, answers Wordsworth's innocent question with a parodic allusion to it that amounts to a working-man's joke on a comfortable outsider whose purpose is manipulation of pastoral conventions, not knowledge of labor: “What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself.” The reaper is the occasion for Wordsworth's imaginative excursion; Wordsworth is in part recollecting his experience as a literal tourist who doesn't speak the language, but it hardly matters. In fact

his outsiderly perspective (linguistically, economically, and educationally inflected) is all to the good: he is not obligated to communication, only to searching his own inwardness. So just as fast as he can, and while seeming to honor the mesmeric power of the reaper's song, Wordsworth moves in his second stanza from the site of the reaper's work to faraway romantic places, "Arabian sands," "the farthest Hebrides." Through Frost's lens Wordsworth's poem becomes everything that Frost's is not: "a dream of the gift of idle hours." Frost's poem, in this dialogue of literary history, claims that this man who writes *is* working, he *is* the solitary reaper.

Wordsworth's polished displays of highly regularized rhythm and intricate rhyme pattern, sustained flawlessly from beginning to end, sound monological next to Frost, who moves between the effortless lyric grace of his opening two lines (with anapests, trochees, and iambs fluidly integrated) to the sudden interruption of an unscannable talking (not singing) voice at line three ("What was it it whispered?") and its playful prosy surmises (perhaps, perhaps), then on to the flat declarative and epigrammatic (yet still musically iambic) moment for which he will become famous in the penultimate line: "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Never a poet of discontinuities and fragments in the sense made famous, and made synonymous with modernist collage, by Pound and Eliot, Frost is yet, in his subtlest vocal experiments, a maker of the quiet vocal collage which more than anything else in his repertory of strategies is the mark of his mixed identity as writer-worker and of his difference from the traditional poet represented by Wordsworth.

Frost did what Wordsworth never had to do (worked lower-class jobs), but also what all those represented by Wordsworth's female reaper were not likely to do (write poems of literary sophistication). Frost's virtuoso vocal changes, worked through a heavily Anglo-Saxonate diction, flaunt his difference with Wordsworth, whose nondramatic, regularized lyric voice, bodied forth in high literacy, highlights the critical social difference between the poet who imagines and the object which is the cause of his imagining. The socially and economically comfortable male poet builds visionary stanzas tranquilly upon his recollection of a female laborer, who becomes a peculiarly modern muse for a socially sympathetic English lyricist, the very same who

had gone officially on record in his famous polemical Preface that he intended to honor ordinary voices but who is himself no ordinary voice and whose poem “The Solitary Reaper” unintentionally acknowledges his privileged relation to the base of rural labor which inspired him.

While the poverty and the sex of the solitary reaper doubly and drastically inhibit her access to the ease of literacy that might eventuate in a career like Wordsworth’s, and while Frost’s male mower performs roughly the solitary reaper’s kind of work—therein lie the connections of class across gender—at the same time Frost’s male mower can do what Wordsworth’s female reaper cannot (this is Frost’s pact with Wordsworth): make knowing allusion to literary tradition, here to a Shakespearean song in part about work (“Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun”), thereby revealing his learned, bookish ways in the very voice of the ordinary worker. This laborer is an American who has had the advantage conferred by democratic commitment to education. And his whispering scythe talks not only Shakespeare but also more than a little Andrew Marvell, whose “Damon the Mower” Frost recalls in order deftly to send up—in his critical allusion to “fay or elf”—a patently literary device, an artifice out of touch with the quotidian of farm labor (“The deathless Fairyies take me oft / To lead them in their Danses soft”). No fairies are taking Frost’s poet-laborer anywhere.

More urgently, and closer to literary home, Frost’s whispering scythe implies, through a criticism of W. B. Yeats, the dominant living poet in English in the first decade of the twentieth century, Frost’s own self-critique: in denying “dream” and the work of “fay or elf” Frost, in the directness of his vernacular voice, mounts an internal commentary on the ninetyish poetic diction of a number of his own early dreamy lyrics in *A Boy’s Will* while forecasting the colloquial richness and unpretentiousness of *North of Boston*. Frost stakes his claim to difference not only from Wordsworth’s elite position but also from Yeats and Yeats’s overt celebration of dream in his early poetry and plays which Frost knew intimately, having produced the plays of heart’s desire while a teacher at Pinkerton Academy in 1910: difference from the Yeats who had famously declared in flight from the world of fact that the “dream” of the poets “alone is certain good.” So “dream” becomes in Frost’s poem a doubly coded

term of criticism signifying both the leisured idleness of the British poetic classes and an unmanly contemporary aestheticist fashionability, a world-fleeing imagination whose diction Yeats would purify from his writing with the help of Pound's editing, but which Pound himself would have trouble getting out of his own system until after Frost, in his early-century obscurity at the Derry, New Hampshire farm, had succeeded in doing so, though without the proper critical organs at his disposal to declare his triumph of having made it new.

Boring from within Wordsworth's pastoral territory and Yeats's domain of dream-as-imagination, Frost reduces visionary dream to vision (as in visual) and imagination to the purest act of perception (as in image-making), a precious because fleeting knowledge of fact, and fleeting because labor will not permit leisurely lingering in aesthetic pleasure of natural detail strictly irrelevant to the task of labor. And it is a knowledge that Frost comes to have not as independent agent—the laboring agent knows little freedom—but as agent of *labor's* action. Labor, not Frost, in Frost's most radical identification of literature with work, "knows" "the fact" which is also and at the same time the ultimate dream of imagination; Frost may know only insofar as he labors. The act of labor as an act of imagination rescues dreaming (Yeats's synonym for poetry) from both Wordsworth and Yeats, in this context impractical "dreamers" in the worst sense of the word.

Frost routes dream into a riveted attention to the incidental fact unveiled in work: a glimpse of fact for itself alone opened briefly, in a throw-away moment of syntactical subordination, as if it would be a desecration of work to permit those images of flowers (only parenthetically named) and the "bright green snake" to take over center stage and distract the laborer from his real task. This moment of syntactical subordination in "Mowing" is the expressive sign of a culturally subordinated aesthetics, an American guilt of poesis, the image garnered for no profit, stolen from the process of work which—by opening the possibility of aesthetic experience, of a consciousness momentarily off the groove of its utilitarian routine—becomes the necessary economic ground of aesthetics. So: work, a ruthless end-directed activity, not in hostile opposition to an activity valuable in itself—as the story of nineteenth-century idealist aesthetics would

have it—but work as both constraining and productive context of the aesthetic for those, unlike Wordsworth and Yeats, who find work inescapable, whose own labor, not someone else's, is their peculiarly modern muse.

Yet what comes seeping through this effort to write out of a sympathetic antipastoral of work—a sympathy that would mark his difference from the social and sexual hierarchy of Wordsworth's pastoral performance—is a social arrangement similar to the object of Frost's critique of Wordsworth. Social distance and its corollary attitude, the sentimentalizing of common country labor—an attitude virtually demanded by traditional pastoral—make a subversive return in "Mowing" in order partially to trip up Frost's intention and to reveal his own sentimentalizing impulse in his would-be realist antipoetics and his subtly conventional stance above labor. This literate farmer is more literate than farmer, but uneasily so. This is guilty pastoral, written not out of leisure class privilege but out of American social constraint by a man who wanted his work to be writing, not those other jobs he did that qualify officially in our culture as work—including farming—and that he found so dissatisfying. The "earnest love" of this farmer's "long scythe" that "laid the swale" (not just any meadow but a low-lying, moist depression of a meadow), this farmer's productive phallic love throws into even greater subordination the moment of aesthetic vision as an interiorized moment of pathos, a moment freed from the act of labor (which makes hay while the sun shines)—unproductive, masturbatory, the indulgent feminine moment. In "Mowing," the literal parenthesis of lyric impression.

The didactic force of Frost's difficult penultimate line yields its statement best against the background of the huge cultural claims for poetic function made by traditional theories of poetry from Aristotle to Wordsworth. The role of poetry for a poet who is constricted by inescapable labor, a poet without the classic advantages, is perhaps a diminished thing in light of the portentousness of those earlier claims. But perhaps poetic function is newly enhanced, after all, in this kind of modern setting of work. Poetry now becomes a pragmatic personal urgency, an aid to getting by in a social setting which for Frost (in this he is representative of the modern American writer) doesn't make getting by very easy. Frost's implied comparative and his

explicit superlative condense a story of literary and social history: Dreams sweet and sweeter, the dreams of Marvell, Wordsworth and Yeats—the easy poetic gold of idleness—yield to dreams sweetest. Sweetest dream—the best dream of all—is a form of laboring consciousness, somehow and oddly identical with “facts”—what is presumably raw, informational, objectively there. But “fact” in that ordinary sense is turned by this poet into an extraordinary thing; this constricted laborer just happens (an American happening) to be schooled in Latin etymologies of English ordinariness. *Factum*: a thing done, or produced, a matter revealed by and for a laboring consciousness, for no end beyond the momentary refreshment of its own act. *Factum*: a feat, a kind of performance, a display of prowess, the virtuosity, the poetry of work, but also (how could aesthetic contemplation be otherwise for a practical American male?) a kind of crime, as in an accessory after the fact.

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